Hafa Adai!

Happy New Year!

Saipan Tribune

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THE CNMI'S FIRST DAILY NEWSPAPER

Volume XXXI, Issue No. 260
FRIDAY DECEMBER 31, 2021
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PERSONS OF THE YEAR

COVID-19 contact tracing team

By BEA CABRERA
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CORRESPONDENT

» 'The guardians of the community'

Their work schedule says 8am to 5pm but that's only on paper. The CNMI's contact tracers work Sunday to Sunday and a usual day starts as early as 5am and often stretch all the way to 3am.

See TEAM on **Page 4**



The men and women of the Communicable Disease Investigation of the CNMI Contact Tracing Team.
BEA CABRERA

SMALL BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

Tyler's Gelatte Stone

By JOSHUA SANTOS
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REPORTER

Italians call their frozen dessert "gelato." But Ben Babauta wanted a name that would immediately convey that his

See TYLER'S on **Page 4**





The Communicable Disease Investigation Team: From left, team leader Ben Lisua, team leader Vincent Kaipat, director for Environmental Health John Tagabuel, FEMA Situation Unit leader and licensed nurse Karen Buettner, team leader Juliet Laniyu, and CDI3 team leader Dwayne Davis.
BEA CABRERA

13th death, 122 new positive cases

Gov. Ralph DLG Torres, the Governor's COVID-19 Task Force, and the Commonwealth Healthcare Corp. have confirmed the CNMI's 13th total COVID-19-related death yesterday, which was first reported late Wednesday night.

CHCC also reported that 122 cases have been added to the CNMI's tally of positive COVID-19 cases, bringing the CNMI total to 3,085 cases since March 28, 2020. These

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A rundown of the top stories of 2021. **PAGE 2**

Falling fuel prices will result in FAC cut effective Jan. 1. **PAGE 13**

AT A GLANCE

As of 5:46pm, Dec. 30, 2021

VACCINATIONS IN THE CNMI

Eligible Population Fully Vaccinated: 94.4%

Days since last community transmission 3

Pfizer/BioNTech	
Initiated:	36,681
Fully Vaccinated:	34,718
Moderna	
Initiated:	5,279
Fully Vaccinated:	4,857
Janssen	
Fully vaccinated:	1,117

GUAM	OLD	NEW	TOTAL
Positive	19,531	35	19,566
Recovered	18,959	0	18,959
Active	302	35	337
Deaths	270	0	270

SAIPAN	OLD	NEW	TOTAL
Positive	2,963	122	3,085
Traced via Travel Screening	308	6	314
Traced via Community Screening	2,655	116	2,771
Deaths	12	1	13

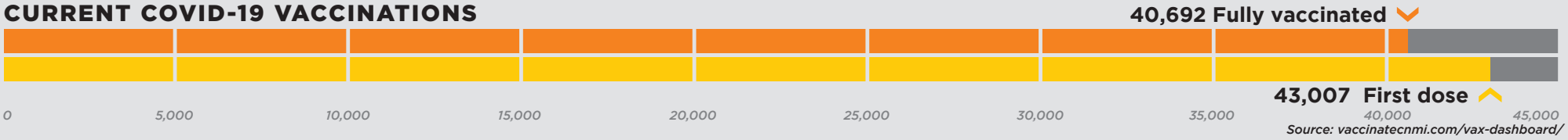
Source: Joint Information Center - Guam, Commonwealth Healthcare Corp., https://www.vaccinatecnmi.com/vax-dashboard/

COMMUNITY VULNERABILITY

LEGEND:
- **Red:** Least safe
- **Orange**
- **Yellow**
- **Blue**
- **Green:** Safest

Source: Office of the Governor

CURRENT COVID-19 VACCINATIONS



Source: vaccinatecnmi.com/vax-dashboard/

INSIDE



BUSINESS
Hundreds of flights are cancelled as the omicron creates havoc both for travelers and airlines.

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NATION
Ghislaine Maxwell is convicted of luring teenage girls to be sexually abused by Jeffrey Epstein.

PAGE 14



WORLD
The head of the World Health Organization is worried about the omicron and delta variants of COVID-19.

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SCAN ME WITH A COMPATIBLE QR READER TO KEEP UPDATED ON ALL THE LATEST NEWS.

Local



A rundown of the top stories of 2021

COVID-19 may have been the main headliner in all news outlets this year but it was not the only thing that happened in 2021. Amid all the furor, panic, anxiety, and fear caused by this pandemic that has dragged on for two years, other noteworthy events also managed to jostle for front-page space, claiming journalists' and readers' attention and surfacing through the COVID-19-related news cycle. Here and in no particular order, *Saipan Tribune* gives you a rundown of the top stories in the Commonwealth this year:

CNMI sees rise in community cases

On Oct. 28, three positive cases of COVID-19 within the community were identified through a collaboration between the CNMI Public School System, Governor's COVID-19 Task Force, and the Commonwealth Healthcare Corp. That ended the CNMI's 217-day streak of zero community transmission that had stood at three deaths and 291 positive cases. As of writing, the CNMI is now in Week 10 of a rise in community cases of COVID-19, with total positive number of cases at 3,085 and 13 deaths. The CHCC reported that, since Oct. 28, there have been 2,794 new cases, 2,107 recoveries, 677 active cases, and 10 deaths of the cases identified. ***(Joshua Santos)***

Fatal hit-and-run

A fatal hit-and-run left 20-year-old Sophia Demapan lifeless along the shoulder of Route 30 in Marpi, on the night of July 27.

Responding officers reported that Demapan had multiple lacerations and deformities on her body. In addition, the officers also noticed that she sustained multiple fractures and severe injuries to her head. Demapan was pronounced dead at CHC on July 28 by Dr. Bryan Strickland.

After over a week, on Aug. 8, 2021, the Department of Public Safety issued a warrant for the arrest of the alleged driver of the vehicle that struck Demapan. However, because the driver was a 17-year-old male, the driver was tried as a juvenile and his case was therefore closed to public, including to the family of the deceased.

The incident blew up on social media and a movement was launched called #JusticeForSophia in hopes of getting answers about the incident and for other hit-and-run cases that have gone cold through the years. ***(Kimberly B. Esmores)***

'Road to 80'

To boost the CNMI's vaccination rate, government agencies and business partners came together to launch the marketing campaign "Road to 80," with the target of reaching 80% of the CNMI's eligible population being vaccinated against COVID-19. The campaign featured thousands of dollars in prizes given away weekly to lucky winners selected from a pool made up of the CNMI's fully vaccinated population.

The campaign, which ran from July 12 to Aug. 28, began with a $500 raffle, then $1,000, $1,500, $2,000, and so on, and culminated in the announcement of winners of $2,500,

Continued on Next Page









From Page 2

$5,000, $15,000, a boat, and a 2020 Nissan Rogue Sport at the Taste of the Marianas.

Before the campaign, the CNMI was at 67% vaccinated. A little over a month and many prizes later, the CNMI reached 77%. The CNMI officially reached 80% vaccinated on Sep. 10, two weeks after Road to 80 ended, but the campaign played a huge part in getting the CNMI close. ***(Joshua Santos)***

In-person, online, and in-person again at PSS

The CNMI Public School System began the 2021-2022 school year with student cohorts and talks of allowing schools with 80% of its eligible students vaccinated against COVID-19 to return to full in-person classes. However, with an announcement on Oct. 28, all PSS schools transitioned back to online learning.

On Oct. 28 PSS announced that two positive cases of COVID-19 were found through PSS' school-based antigen testing. All PSS schools were closed for in-person classes for 10 days, originally setting a reopening date of Nov. 15. Before Nov. 15, the Board of Education voted to reschedule reopening to Nov. 29.

On Nov. 28, PSS decided to go with a staggered return to in-person classes based on schools' COVID-19 screening/testing schedule. PSS returned to online instruction for two weeks from Dec. 6 to Dec. 23.

The BOE later voted to set Jan. 3, 2022, as the day all CNMI PSS schools will return to full in-person classes. ***(Joshua Santos)***

Ascendant Democrats

The NMI Republican Party's decades-old grip on the CNMI House of Representatives ended in January 2021 when representatives elected an independent lawmaker, Edmund S. Villagomez (Ind-Saipan) as speaker of the 22nd Legislature.

This happened after Rep. Ralph N. Yumul (R-Saipan) flipped his vote and broke the 10-10 tie during the fourth voting for the speakership, ending the three-day impasse in the longest House inauguration and organizational session.

Villagomez's election as speaker completed the ascendance of the NMI Democratic Party. Some said the last time the Democratic Party controlled the House was in the 4th Legislature.

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$3.6M expended for first batch of premium pay

By FERDIE DE LA TORRE
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REPORTER

The Torres administration has expended $3.6 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds for the first batch of the premium pay for CNMI government employees who have worked directly to mitigate the COVID-19 as well as those government employees who have worked to provide services since the pandemic began.

The administration is also working on the payment of premium pay for frontliners and workers in the private sector who worked in the battle against the virus.

Speaking at a radio press briefing yesterday, Gov. Ralph DLG Torres said those having an account with Bank of Guam should be receiving their premium pay that day (yesterday), while those with accounts in any other banks should be getting their money by today, Friday.

"That's the last information I got," he said.

The governor said those government employees who have worked on the front lines at least 40 hours to directly mitigate the pandemic will be receiving $5,000 in premium pay/bonus.

He said government employees who have worked to provide essential public services during this pandemic will be getting $1,000 in premium pay/bonus.

Torres said that's only for those under the Executive Branch, as other divisions and departments in autonomous agencies, have all gotten their money for their services during the pandemic.

A longer version of this story is available at www. saipantribune.com

Torres urges House to act on retirees' $500 bonuses, or offer a solution

By FERDIE DE LA TORRE
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REPORTER

Stressing that the $500 bonuses for government retirees is a priority, Gov. Ralph DLG Torres urged the House of Representatives yesterday to offer a solution if they don't agree with his request to pass a joint resolution to allow the reprogramming of $1.3 million from the general fund.

In response to an inquiry during a radio press briefing, Torres said the House's inaction hurts him because that's a priority as the money will help the retirees during the holidays.

"The money is there," the governor said.

Torres said that, since the Senate had already unanimously passed Senate Joint Resolution 22-05, all the House needs to do is pass it.

He said if the representatives disagree, then they should create a solution, such as starting their own resolution and passing it.

Torres said if it calls for an emergency session, then the House should do it.

"I'll be happy to sit here and wait, and have the retirees get their bonuses," he said.

Torres pointed out it will be the retirees who will benefit, not him.

Last Dec. 15, the Senate adopted Senate Joint Resolution 22-05 authored by Senate President Jude U. Hofschneider (R-Tinian), approving Torres' request to the Legislature to create a new program and business unit for the $500 retiree bonuses. Senators approved Torres' request to reprogram $1.3 million from the general fund for the payment of the retirees' bonuses.

Last Dec. 20, House Speaker Edmund S. Villagomez (Ind-Saipan) decided to keep the joint resolution on the agenda for further review after vice speaker Blas Jonathan T. Attao (R-Saipan) raised some issues and underscored the need for more information from the Department of Finance and the administration.

Last Dec. 20, Senate legal counsel Antonette Villagomez issued a legal opinion, stating that the Senate has a constitutional authority to introduce and adopt Senate Joint Resolution 22-05.

TEAM

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Right off the bat, one can see that it's not a job just for anybody. It requires determination, vigilance, rapid action, and a clear understanding that you are part of a vast network designed to keep the CNMI as safe as possible during this COVID-19 pandemic.

And that has held true for the CNMI until late October this year. For several months, positive cases in the CNMI were detected right away at the border until October 2021, when the community was suddenly struck with a COVID-19 outbreak, one after the other, with the number of positive cases rising from single digits to triple digits. Many said it was bound to happen, but the COVID-19 contact tracing team that leads disease control are intimately aware that they must always be two steps ahead and working hard to prevent the spread of COVID-19, as if each member carries a torch to keep the light on so we can all sleep at night.

The increasing number of people being identified positive for COVID-19 is certainly concerning but it must also be pointed out that many of these new cases were identified via contact tracing, which speaks well of the rapidity and effectiveness of the Communicable Disease Inspection teams in finding the transmission routes. In this era of the COVID-19 pandemic, the contact tracing team stands as a guardian to break the chains of transmission of COVID-19 and keep the CNMI safe.

"Contact tracers may not have the medical background but they certainly have the courage to come face to face with those infected with the virus," according to Commonwealth Healthcare Corp. CEO Esther Muña.

Contact tracing includes the epidemiologist who provides guidance and support for the team and includes many other staff of CHCC that work together to minimize the further spread of the virus. "It is interwoven of all efforts from different sections of the CHCC and it includes other agencies within the Governor's [COVID-19] Task Force. This includes the medical staff, nursing staff, laboratory staff, incident command operations staff, population health staff, Department of Fire and Emergency Medical Services, Alcohol, Beverage and Tobacco Control, Commonwealth Office of Transportation Authority, and communications, among many others," Muña said.

The Communicable Disease Inspection Team under the Environmental Health and Disease Prevention, a team composed of assets from the Commonwealth Healthcare Corp. and other agencies of the Governor's Task Force, holds office at the Koblerville COVID-19 Center where members of the community can go for their COVID-19 concerns.

The CDI Team is always racing against time as they work seven days a week, tallying the daily number of cases, identifying contacts and taking charge of how fast these contacts are isolated, whether at home or in a facility.

According to Communicable Disease Inspection 3 team leader Dwayne Davis, the team started with nine members. "It grew over the months. …We would like to say that our work schedule is 8am to 5pm but, in all honesty, we have not had that. We work Sunday to Sunday and a usual day starts at 5am and ends at 3am so these guys tend to work long hours. CDI3 is not just contact tracing because there are other areas they also focus on," he said.

"Among those areas is airport surveillance. …We have a team in charge of transporting people, administrative, and coordination with the hospital. … Everybody is a contact tracer but just with specific roles in different areas," he added.

The team is composed of different groups with a specific task on hand. Thirty two members currently devote their knowledge, skills, time and passion to keeping the community safe. Many of them started as volunteers when the CNMI experienced its first COVID-19 cluster in March 2019 and they stayed on.

Davis described the investigation and transportation units as the heart and soul of the operation that is headed by team leaders Vincent Kaipat and Ben Lisua and the liaison that connects CDI to the hospital is team leader Juliet Laniyu. He also pointed out that their efforts are not just focused on Saipan. "People think that we only have our eyes on Saipan, which is false. …We have built very strong teams on Tinian and Rota. Before the COVID-19 spread was declared a pandemic, we already went to Tinian and we have extended training on Rota to make sure these hubs are protected since both islands receive travelers," Davis added.

Those methods that were put in place since the beginning has helped the CNMI manage COVID-19. "COVID-19 was expected to be here some time ago but because of the methods that we put out, the protocols we practice, we have managed to keep this bubble," he said.

"We are the only U.S. territory that offers real time testing availability on many testing facilities on site on Saipan, Tinian, and Rota so the availability to get tested for detection is there," said Davis.

A longer version of this story is available at www. saipantribune.com

CASES

From Page 1

new cases were confirmed positive for COVID-19 from surveillance and travel testing on Dec. 27 and 28, 2021.

In the latest fatality, the news release said the patient tested positive for COVID-19 in December and was identified at CHCC. The same circumstances were identified in four other COVID-19 deaths. No further details will be disclosed.

"My deepest and heartfelt condolences go out to the families of those in our community who have recently passed. This is never easy news to hear, or to share. I want to encourage anyone who is unvaccinated, to please get vaccinated. I also urge our community to continue to practice the 3 W's by wearing your masks, washing your hands, and watching your distance. We are in this together, Marianas," said Gov. Ralph DLG Torres.

"It's difficult to lose a family member, especially during the holidays. Our sincerest condolences and sympathies go out to the families, and we will provide the necessary support," said CHCC CEO Esther L. Muña. "We encourage everyone who's eligible for a booster shot to get their booster shot. While we have the treatment available to help, vaccines are our best tool against COVID-19. We cannot emphasize enough how important vaccines are in this fight against COVID-19."

As of Dec. 28, 2021, there have been 2,107 recoveries, 677 active cases, and 10 deaths of the cases identified since Oct. 28, 2021.

As of Dec. 29, 2021, there were 17 individuals hospitalized as a result of COVID-19 (11 unvaccinated, six vaccinated; two on a ventilator); and one discharged. ***(Saipan Tribune)***

TYLER'S

From Page 1

new business—a gelato shop—is a local, Saipan-based company. That's when he hit upon the idea of creating a portmanteau of "gelato" and "latte stone," hence "gelatte stone." Add to that the name of his son, Tyler, and that's how Babauta came up with Tyler's Gelatte Stone.

What stands out, though, is that after opening only in June this year at Sugar King Park, Tyler's Gelatte Stone has already paved the way for giving back to good causes and lifting up other small businesses through its "Small Business Sundays." These noteworthy activities of such a young company are what prompted *Saipan Tribune* to name the company as its 2021 Small Business of the Year.

For donations to causes, Babauta said the creamery's first goal was to make a donation to the Autism Society of the CNMI. Tyler's raised $1,500 in total for the ASCNMI, and made the donation on Sept. 30.

Tyler's put together the $1,500 through purchase-matching campaign and through a portion of the money raised during events Tyler's calls "Small Business Sundays."

For a one- to two-month period earlier this year Tyler's pledged that, for every gelato sold, it will donate $1 to the ASCNMI.

"Small Business Sunday," on the other hand, is an event where the community is treated to live music and small businesses are invited to promote and sell their products at Sugar King Park from 3pm to 6pm. The most recent "Small Business Sunday" was held on Nov. 28.

So far, Babauta said, there have been four "Small Business Sundays" and 21 different small businesses have participated.

The next cause that Tyler's wanted to make a donation to was the Northern Marianas Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Violence. Since October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month and the color of the month is purple, Tyler's developed an *ube*-based gelato flavor dubbed "I Got U-Bae" and again pledged that, for every gelato sold for the month of October, Tyler's will donate $1 to the NMCADSV.

Most recently, Tyler's pledged that, for every gelato that was purchased and donated to the Division of Youth Services, it will match that donation. Babauta said that 50 of these donation purchases were made, Tyler's matched them, and now 100 gelatos will be given to DYS' clients.

In a text to *Saipan Tribune* yesterday from DYS director Vivian Sablan, she and DYS express their "utmost appreciation for the partnership" between Tyler's and DYS.

Babauta added that, due to the high number of donations, the 100 gelatos will be given over the course of three days. One batch was picked up by DYS staff and distributed on Dec. 23, another batch yesterday, and the final batch will be handed out in January.

For his advice to other small businesses to get started giving back to good causes, Babauta first advised placing the focus on creating and delivering quality products to your customers and "show for it." When ready to begin thinking about conducting outreaches, Babauta advised being thoughtful, "doing it from the heart," and pursuing a non-profit organization that is meaningful to you and/or your family.

When asked about future plans for Tyler's, Babauta said the creamery has been in talks with local restaurants to partner up and sell gelatos within their establishments.

Wishing you a very happy New Year!
We know that this past year has been full of challenges,
and we pray that the coming year brings more
certain times for you and your family.
Sending all our good wishes for better days ahead.

2022

• H A P P Y • N E W • Y E A R •



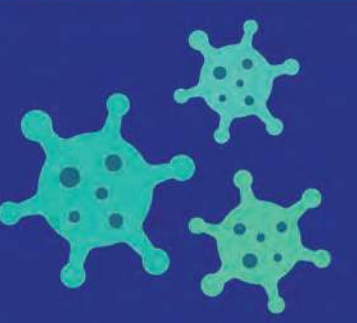
David M. Apatang
Mayor of Saipan and staff

How to gather safely during the holidays



GET TESTED IF YOU HAVE BEEN IN CONTACT OR FEEL SYMPTOMS

Testing can give you information about your risk of spreading COVID-19. While you wait for your test results, you should limit your contact with others as much as possible.





Register for free community-based testing at
https://covidtesting.chcc.health.

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STORIES

From Page 3

The House currently has nine Democrats, seven Republicans, and four independents. ***(Ferdie de la Torre)***

$512M ARPA money

The CNMI government received in May 2021 the $481.9 million that was allocated to the Commonwealth under the American Rescue Plan Act. The ARPA money provides emergency funding for the ongoing COVID-19 emergency, replenishes lost government revenue due to the pandemic, and brings back jobs within the government that had been lost. Finance Secretary David DLG Atalig earlier stated that ARPA has different sections of funding and that the $481.0 million is the amount allocated for the CNMI under Section 602.

In June 2021, Atalig presented details of how the government plans to spend $512,076,165 million in ARPA funding—considered the largest one-time cash gift the federal government has ever given the CNMI so far.

Gov. Ralph DLG Torres said the ARPA funding will propel the CNMI to the 21st century. A total of $175 million in ARPA money was added to the $103.3 million general fund, bringing to $278.3 million the amount allocated for government operations in fiscal year 2022**.** ***(Ferdie de la Torre)***

Rep. Blanco passes away

The untimely passing of Rep. Ivan A. Blanco (R-Saipan) on July 23, 2021, stunned the community. Police said Blanco, 45, just had lunch with his staff at the Aqua Resort Club in Achugao and, as they were leaving and were all in their vehicles, he rolled down his window and asked for assistance from a staff member. Blanco was guided out of his vehicle. An ambulance transported him to the hospital where he was pronounced dead. Police said the medical report says the cause of death was "massive pulmonary embolism."

Guam and others throughout Micronesia joined the CNMI in mourning his passing, many describing Blanco as a leader, statesman, a true diplomat, and a dedicated public servant.

Blanco's death triggered a special election on Oct. 16, 2021, to fill the vacant House seat for Precinct 3. At the election, Corina L. Magofna (D-Saipan) easily defeated Grace "Pitu" Sablan Vaiagae of the Republican Party**.** ***(Ferdie de la Torre)***



IPI license suspended

The Commonwealth Casino Commission board ordered the indefinite suspension of Imperial Pacific International (CNMI) LLC's gaming license on April 22, 2021, for violating the CCC's five enforcement actions.

The same CCC board order directed IPI to pay $6.6 million in total penalty within six months, and pay immediately $15.5 million and $3.1 million in annual casino exclusive license fee and annual casino regulatory fee, respectively.

IPI, however, appealed to the Superior Court to challenge CCC board's final order. As of yesterday, IPI has not paid any amount as its appeal is pending in court. IPI's non-payment caused CCC to implement a budget cut, losing many employees due to terminations and the resignation of others.

Last September, CCC executive director Andrew Yeom filed five complaints against IPI, seeking the revocation of its IPI's exclusive casino license for alleged unwillingness to comply with the CCC's final order in five enforcement actions. ***(Ferdie de la Torre)***

JGO investigates Torres

The House of Representatives Judiciary and Governmental Operations Committee chaired by Rep. Celina R. Babauta (D-Saipan) started its investigation into Gov. Ralph DLG Torres' expenditures of public funds and travels on Aug. 25, 2021.

As of yesterday, the JGO is not done yet with its investigation as the committee has yet to call in Finance Secretary David DLG Atalig to testify.

Last Dec. 14, the committee voted to hold Torres in contempt for not appearing before the committee. In explaining as to why he did not appear before the committee, Torres cited, among other reasons, that the Executive Branch is a separate and equal branch of the government under the Commonwealth Constitution.

Torres then sued the JGO Committee in Superior Court. Last Dec. 20, Babauta introduced House Resolution 22-14 impeaching Torres for alleged commission of felonies, corruption, and neglect of duty. ***(Ferdie de la Torre)***

NMC master plan OK'd

In a meeting on Aug. 17, the Northern Marianas College Board of Regents approved the college's seven-phase facilities master plan. The first phase is set to begin with the construction of a new student center, a project that is expected to break ground in 2022.

The master plan also includes projects to improve and develop Chalan Monsignor Road, and plans to work with key public and private sector stakeholders to create a "college town" environment around NMC's As Terlaje campus. Facilities master plans for NMC's Tinian and Rota campuses are in the works as well. ***(Joshua Santos)***

Arago passes away

Glicerio "Eli" Del Mundo Arago, who was the Philippine honorary consul for the CNMI and publisher of *Saipan Tribune*, passed away on Nov. 24 at the Guam Regional Medical City in Guam. He was 69 years old.

In a joint statement from the Philippine Honorary Consulate for the CNMI and the Philippine Consulate General Agaña, Guam, it was shared that Arago died of complications from a stroke.

A public viewing and funeral Mass for Arago was held at the Mount Carmel Cathedral on Dec. 4. ***(Joshua Santos)***

Travel bubble

To kick-start the CNMI's tourism industry amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the CNMI government, in collaboration with the Marianas Visitors Authority launched a South Korean travel bubble under MVA's Travel Investment Resumption Plan, or TRIP.

The program, which officially kicked off on July 24, was originally supposed to end around September but has since been extended twice—first through the end of December, then again through the end of January.

The CNMI's sole travel bubble at the moment started with 92 passengers but the number of passengers has risen as Korea entered its fall and winter season.

To date, the program has garnered approximately a little over 7,000 participants despite the high volume of cancellationsby the end of November due to the spike in the omicron variant.

The initial goal was to serve about 8,000 participants but about 27% cancelled as result of omicron. ***(Kimberly B. Esmores)***

PUA/FPUC ends

After over a year of disbursing benefits to those who lost their jobs or whose jobs were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the CNMI Department of Labor officially concluded its Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program and Federal Pandemic Unemployment compensation in October.

The CNMI DOL officially stopped accepting PUA claims last Oct. 4. However, the official expiration of benefit disbursement will be June 2022; any unspent funds after June 2022 will be returned to USDOL.

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As 2021 comes to a close, we look back and reflect on the blessings the year has bestowed upon us… as well as the hardships we challenged that brought our people and our islands together.

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2022

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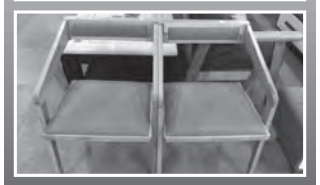
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STORIES

From Page 6

Currently, around 384 claims are waiting to be adjudicated.

Since the program launched in June 2020, the U.S. Department of Labor has allocated roughly $700 million specifically for unemployment assistance in the CNMI. To date, over $260 million has been used so far. The funds were disbursed to a total of 16,788 applicants since June 2020. ***(Kimberly B. Esmores)***

SMA suspends flights

After a dispute regarding the Commonwealth Ports Authority's new method of assessing airport usage fees, the CNMI's sole interisland air carrier, Star Marianas Air Inc., suspended flights for nearly two weeks.

However, after coming to a compromise on a temporary resolution, which includes the suspension of airport usage fees, Star Marianas resumed its flights on a charter basis on Dec. 16.

After a conversation between Star Marianas and the Office of the Governor regarding subsidy for these flights and mediating the ongoing dispute between Star Marianas and CPA, Star Marianas resumed its scheduled flight service starting Dec. 22.

Currently, CPA is applying with the U.S Department of Transportation to provide federal subsidy for airlines who provide interisland air service to the CNMI. ***(Kimberly B. Esmores)***

IPI auction OK'd

After years of legal proceedings, the U.S. District Court for the NMI granted USA Fanter Corp.'s request to auction Imperial Pacific International (CNMI) LLC's assets to satisfy a court judgment of $2.1 million back in July.

On Oct. 28, Clear Management Ltd, a company headed by Silver Heritage Group cofounder Tim Shepherd, was appointed to serve as receiver in the auction of IPI's assets to administer, collect, or sell any casino gaming property IPI owns and to do any other acts to satisfy the judgment.

In November, the court allowed other IPI creditors to "piggy back" on the receivership to satisfy their respective lawsuits against IPI.

However, on Dec. 14, IPI posted a $2.45 million "supersedeas" bond as surety on behalf of IPI as principal to stay the receivership. On Dec. 19, the District Court granted IPI's request to extend the stay on the limited receivership again. ***(Kimberly B. Esmores)***

A longer version of this story is available at www. saipantribune.com


HAPPY
New Year
2022
Wishing you and yours a safe, healthy,
and prosperous new year.
Cheers to peace, happiness, and prosperity in 2022.
FROM THE MANAGEMENT & STAFF OF:
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HEALTH IS WEALTH
Tan Siu Lin Foundation
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Opinion

Hafa Adai!
Saipan Tribune
THE CNMI'S FIRST DAILY NEWSPAPER
Volume XXXI, Issue No. 260
Published daily at 2/F JP Center,
Beach Road, Garapan, Saipan, CNMI
Mailing Address: PMB 34, Box 10001, Saipan, MP, 96950

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EDITORIAL

What works as new COVID surge hits Florida

First the bad news: The highly transmissible omicron variant is surging, sending infections to record levels in some parts of the country. On Friday, Florida reported a 323 percent increase in COVID-19 cases from the week before, even before Americans traveled in droves for the busy holiday season. But the nation is in a much better place as the New Year approaches. Americans have the tools to manage the pandemic, and the coming weeks will be critical to curbing the virus' spread.

Omicron is spreading across the nation just as most experts predicted, with Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and other states and territories reporting more cases of COVID in the past week than in any other seven-day period. On Friday, the seven-day national average of new daily cases surpassed 197,000, a 65 percent jump over the previous two weeks, and a spike that didn't even reflect the advent of holiday travel. Hospitalizations and deaths, which are lagging indicators, were also up, though not as severely. Florida reported 125,201 coronavirus cases over the seven-day period from Dec. 17-23, an average of about 17,886 infections per day. That's a 323 percent increase from the week prior. At this rate, both the United States and Florida could post records for average daily cases in the coming days or weeks.

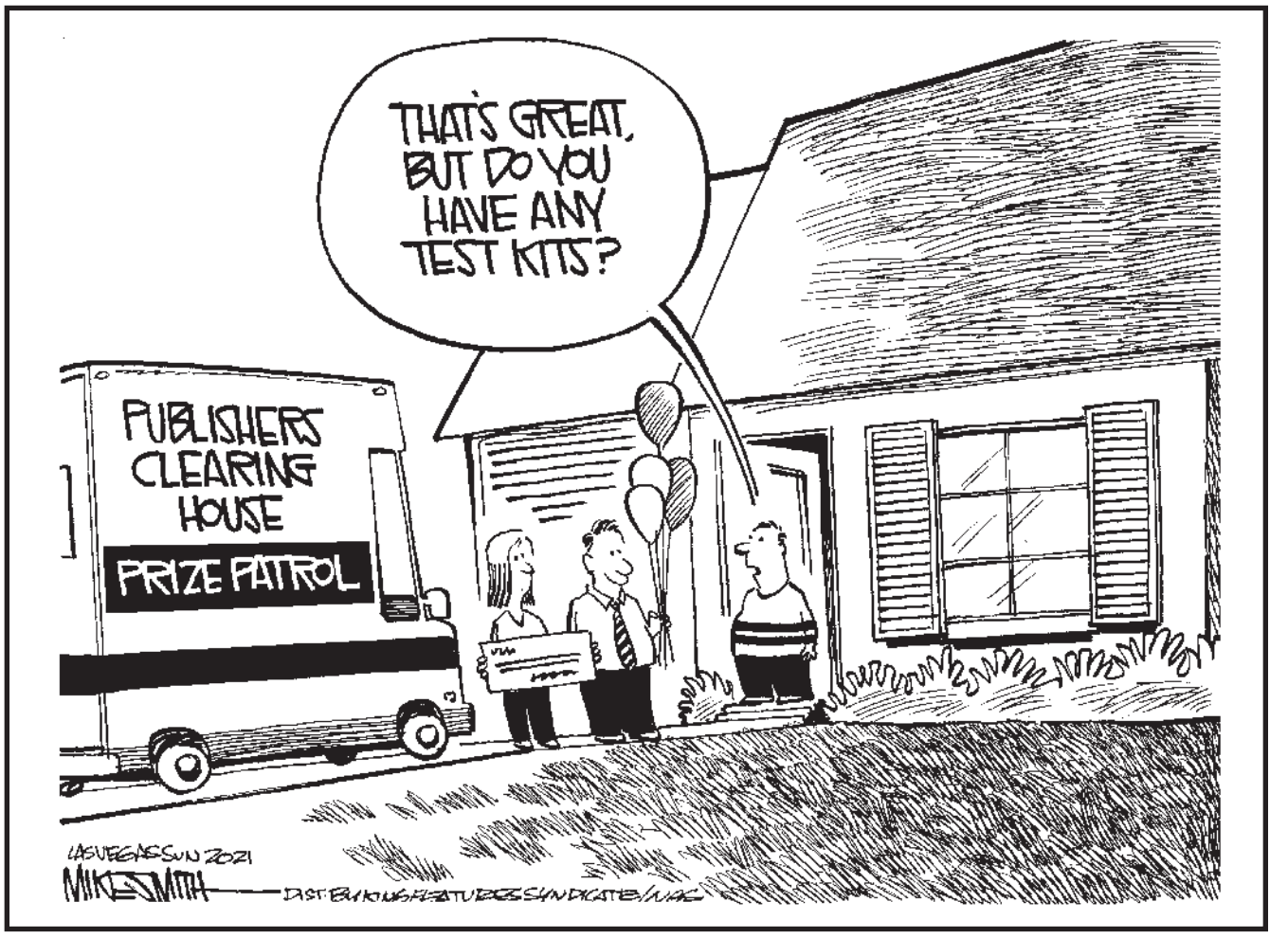
While omicron is spreading rapidly, early signs indicate that the variant is less severe than previous strains, which is good news for the nation's exhausted health care system. Still, the sheer number of infections could still cause enough serious cases to dangerously tax America's hospitals, which have been battered by staff shortages and early retirements since the pandemic erupted almost two years ago.

That's created a race this holiday season to get shots into the unvaccinated, to get those partially vaccinated to return for boosters and to expand testing, a critical early-warning system that can both prevent infections from exploding and help route the nation's medical resources where they are needed most. In a teleconference Monday with the nation's governors, President Joe Biden underscored the additional steps he announced last week, including plans to vastly expand testing. And Biden noted again his commitment to depoliticize the COVID response at both the state and federal levels.

With tens of millions of Americans still unvaccinated, the immediate challenge is to get more shots into arms. Unvaccinated people are 14 times as likely to die from COVID compared with vaccinated patients, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 6 million Floridians ages 5 and up are eligible for the vaccine but remain unvaccinated. Yet last week, Florida administered 195,201 doses, up over 30,000 doses from the week before, with the greatest increase among first-time recipients. That signals some loosening among vaccine holdouts. And while Florida's positivity rate more than doubled last week, to 13.8 percent, that figure reflected a vast increase in testing. Demand for tests has been so strong that retailers are limiting purchases and government agencies are reopening pop-up test sites.

Omicron is everywhere, and with New Year's around the corner, Americans need to be cautious. But with tests, vaccines, clinical care experience and expanded treatment options, the U.S. is far better positioned this holiday season. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious-disease expert, said Monday that authorities were considering shortening the isolation period for people who have been infected with or exposed to COVID-19, another nuanced step in the administration's approach. This is a critical moment for making smart choices, and for realizing that public health and normalcy can coexist.

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Together, we've achieved so much, Marianas

TOGETHER, WE CAN

By RALPH DLG TORRES
Special to the Saipan Tribune



Ralph DLG Torres is the 9th governor of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and is co-chairman of the Governor's Council of Economic Advisers.

As 2021 ends, we look back on an extraordinary two years of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of us experienced loss, sorrow, and heartaches. We made necessary changes in plans, expectations, traditions, and adapted to the "new normal." As we move into the new year with refreshed minds and renewed hope, let's continue to look around and appreciate all that life has to offer.

I've been reflecting on the past five years of my administration and how far we've all come after two devastating typhoons—Super Typhoon Soudelor and Super Typhoon Yutu—left the Marianas with no power for weeks. Many of our residents had their roofs ripped off while many others had no home at all. It was one of the most challenging times in our history. Downed poles and strewn vehicles blocked the roads, making some areas impassable. With the help of federal funds, the Commonwealth was able to begin rebuilding itself.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, my administration formed the Governor's Council of Economic Advisers through an executive order in May 2020. We needed a council who could focus on improving the lives of those who mattered most—those who call the Marianas home. GCEA's mission also focuses on transforming the Marianas into a world-class destination. Within this council, the Public Private Partnership program was created, and together with our PPP partners—made up of dedicated community members, businesses, and organizations—we have achieved so much. In one year, GCEA accumulated 70 PPP Partners, who were instrumental in transforming and beautifying 74 sites on Rota, Tinian, and Saipan.

Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands
GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL OF ECONOMIC ADVISERS

I thank each council member and PPP volunteer for their service to the Marianas. I receive many compliments about how we have been able to create a warm sense of community, where residents are actively engaged in making the Marianas a better place to live for all. It's a true testament to the determination and commitment we have to each other. The Hafa Adai & Tirow spirit is alive and well in the Marianas! For this, I am grateful and proud.

Speaking of pride, GCEA launched its community-building campaign called the Marianas Village Pride that aims to directly improve life at the village level—the Adopt-A-Median program, MVP Village Flag Art Contest, MVP Lessons and Coloring Pages for our schools, MVP Bus Stop Beautification Contest, and the MVP Christmas Decorating Contest. This is only the beginning. The MVP Campaign will continue to grow in 2022 to inspire more residents to become active in village beautification, ignite village and Marianas pride, and promote the unique spirit of each village as part of a unified Marianas.

Within the first month of launching the campaign, we received great feedback from our partner schools and businesses. As of this week, Adopt-A-Median Partners rejuvenated 12 medians in busy, important intersections around the island, making our streets and sidewalks safer for motorists and pedestrians. Schools have already committed to adopting the sidewalks, crosswalks, and medians around their campuses. Together, We Can!

More improvements planned for 2022

We will be expanding our PPP program in 2022. Our partners have laid a solid foundation for the program, and we will begin Phase 2 of our destination transformation plans. We have identified key sites on Rota, Tinian, and Saipan that will be transformed and reimagined. I am most excited to see the Garapan Fishing Base Boardwalk concept come to life. We will continue to share more of what the council has planned in the first quarter of 2022.

Another GCEA initiative to look forward to is the implementation of the Marianas Universal Garbage Collection plan. Through an executive order, we created a Universal Garbage Collection Task Force. The task force included private citizens and representatives from the government, environmental, business sectors to identify a plan for a Marianas-wide garbage collection system. The vision includes providing efficient, responsible, and sustainable collection of solid waste for homes, businesses, and public areas that will also combat illegal dumping. Their recommendation has been received and is now under review.

2022 is a time for new beginnings. I look forward to a new year in which my staff and key agencies will continue to support the exceptional work of our public servants, private sector partners, and community volunteers. May 2021 find its rightful place in lasting memory, and may we continue to make our way to a new year of recovery, revitalization, love, and joy. *Felis åño nuebo*, stay safe, and take care, Marianas!

For more information, visit the GCEA at cnmieconomy.com, on Facebook and Instagram (@cnmigov.economy), or contact them at gceacnmi@gmail.com.

EDITORIAL POLICY Letters to the editor must include the NAME, VILLAGE ADDRESS, and CONTACT NUMBER of the contributor. Letters that do not have these information will immediately be trashed. Contributions consisting of 500 words or less have more chances of getting published. The *Saipan Tribune* reserves the right to publish a contribution or not; the right to edit submissions for length, accuracy, and clarity; and the right to publish and distribute contributions in print, electronic, or other media formats. Submissions may be sent via snail mail to the 2nd Floor, JP Center, Beach Road, Garapan, Saipan, 96950; fax (670) 235-3740; e-mail to editor@saipantribune.com; or through our website at www.saipantribune.com.

Task force submits recommendations for the Marianas' first Universal Garbage Collection system

TRASH TALK

By GARY SWORD
Special to the Saipan Tribune



Gary Sword is chairman of the Universal Garbage Collection Task Force. He is the vice president of the KKMP radio station, one of the most popular and beloved stations in the Marianas, and has extensive experience in power, water, wastewater, and solid waste services. Sword serves as a member of the Domestic Policy Recovery Committee for the Governor's Council of Economic Advisers.

Håfa adai yan tirow wóómi! It has been 90 days of research and information gathering for the Universal Garbage Collection Task Force volunteers. We are pleased to report that we have submitted on time our draft report to Gov. Ralph DLG Torres for his review and comments. After the governor reviews the report, we will then finalize and share it with the Legislature for their input. We will also conduct community meetings to welcome input from the public. We want this process to be inclusive to ensure that our community's concerns and recommendations will be acknowledged and addressed.

Our community supports the implementation of a UGC system. Indigenous community elders, the curators of the land and waters of the Mariana Islands, have shared their strong support of UGC. They would like to return to the cleaner environment of 30 to 40 years ago when there were fewer people, less commercially-generated garbage, and littering. They stressed a sense of urgency to change our habits, the volume of trash generated, and how we are managing the Commonwealth's trash issues. We will hear and learn more about the community's sentiments once we embark on our community outreach.

The UGC report shows some interesting statistics and finds that in the Marianas, 30,044 tons of trash were disposed of from Dec. 1, 2020, to Nov. 30, 2021. Of that, 72% or 21,597 tons came from commercial haulers; 19% or 5,778 tons from the government, and 9% or 2,669 tons from individual homeowners. This does not take into account the trash that is illegally dumped.

The report also broke down the types of garbage that made up the total waste: cardboard and other fiber materials (33.3%), other materials (25.6%), yard waste and organics (16.3%), plastics (16.2%), cans and metal containers (5.6%), and glass (4.9%). The GBB Saipan Solid Waste study shows that 26% of the waste was highly recyclable and another 25% could have been recycled or repurposed. This means that half of the waste should not have ended up in landfills.

These same landfills are slated to be closed in a few years due to the volumes of trash deposited. The UGC initiative will help keep our landfills useable through the introduction of composting and recycling programs. This will be the best, most cost-effective, and environmentally sustainable disposal method for the Marianas. The importance of waste management cannot be underscored enough. Poor waste handling and disposal leads to environmental pollution, encourages the breeding of disease-vector insects, scavengers and rodents, and results in a range of diseases.

I thank our community for getting behind this UGC initiative. It will show the world that the Marianas cares about the Earth and will once again be able to showcase its pristine waters and litter-free landscape. Through the process, I appreciated how community members called, sent articles, and contributed ideas to make the UGC plan a working, community-built plan.

Lastly, I want to thank each of our UGC task force chairpersons, members, and volunteers for the work that went into building the draft recommendations to the governor. UGC task force committee members contributed institutional knowledge, specialized skills, and a great heart for our Marianas. Our job is not entirely done, and I look forward to our community's continued support and feedback. I wish you all the best in this New Year.

For more information about the Universal Garbage Collection initiative, visit the GCEA website at cnmieconomy.com. Engage with the UGC Task Force via email at gceacnmi@gmail.com.

Statement on Super Typhoon Rai (Odette)

By RALPH DLG. TORRES
Special to the Saipan Tribune



Ralph DLG Torres is the governor of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

Editor's Note: *The author issued the following video message on the Philippines' Super Typhoon Rai (Odette):*

The destruction that Typhoon Odette, also known as Super Typhoon Rai, has brought upon the Philippines, is devastating. My deepest prayers and condolences go out to our brothers and sisters in the Philippines, who have dealt with the unimaginable in the past few weeks.

I also send my deepest prayers to our *kababayans* on-island who have family in the Philippines facing the aftermath of this disaster. Typhoon Odette has brought extreme loss. Dealing with natural disasters is something that we, as a Commonwealth, have dealt with time and time again. With the same sentiment of togetherness that has navigated our way to recovery, on behalf of myself, my family, and the entire Commonwealth, we send our prayers and condolences to all who have been affected by Typhoon Odette.

The full video message may be found at the following link: https://fb.watch/acUtGMDffy/.

New Year's Day message

By DAVID M. APATANG
Special to the Saipan Tribune



David M. Apatang is mayor of Saipan in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

As 2021 draws to an end, let us continue to pray and keep in our hearts those who have left us, those who have lost so much, and those who are still fighting the virus. It has been a tough year for many of us, from the daily reminders of the pandemic public health emergency guidelines, social distancing, limited or closures and cancellations of many activities and gatherings, to reformatting our daily schedules and routines. But as a community that cares and looks out for one another, we remain committed to ride out these real challenges.

I truly hope that this COVID-19 pandemic will end soon and bring our lives back to normal. My prayer for all is that 2022 will bring many opportunities for our citizens and businesses to grow and prosper. Let us continue to work hard to keep the momentum of our concerted efforts as we look forward to an exciting new year. I would like to thank our veterans, active service members, first responders, frontline essential workers, school administrators, teachers, and everyone in the public and private sectors for all their hard work and dedicated service to our citizens.

I wish everyone a very safe and joyful holiday as we welcome 2022.

End solitary in all its forms

By CHRIS BLACKWELL
Progressive Perspectives

As I woke up for my daily job as a prisoner at the Washington State Reformatory, I drank a cup of freeze-dried coffee and watched the local morning news. One story instantly caught my attention: The reporter said the Washington Department of Corrections, or WDOC, had decided to stop using segregation as punishment. Could this even be possible? I convinced myself that I must have misheard something.

The department claimed it had stopped using disciplinary segregation for two weeks now and had no plan to use it in the future. But, as someone who lives in the violent and oppressive U.S. prison system and has experienced solitary firsthand, I knew the truth: Solitary confinement wasn't over—they had just decided to call it something else.

The reality is that "disciplinary segregation" is just one of the many phrases corrections departments use to describe solitary confinement. States including Michigan, Texas and Virginia routinely hold prisoners in isolation while denying that this is the same as solitary. Simply renaming the practice fails to address the harms it causes.

The press response to the WDOC's announcement was overwhelmingly positive. Some outlets claimed the state was ending solitary confinement entirely, prompting the department to issue a clarification to its own press release, noting that it "continues to utilize segregation for non-disciplinary purposes such as investigations, safety, protective custody and classification."

We need to take a much deeper look into what is actually being changed. From where I sit, this policy shift falls far short of the massive reform that the department is claiming. In its press statements, WDOC admitted that the actual number of days individuals spent in designated disciplinary segregation was small because inmates had often already served time in solitary under administrative segregation while awaiting their hearings.

The WDOC has not yet specified what forms of punishment will be replacing disciplinary segregation. One troubling possibility is confining prisoners in their cells, which is often used as a disciplinary sanction. In some cases, people find themselves in cell confinement for a month or even longer. This approach is really no different than being placed in a separate, empty cell designated for solitary, with nothing but the concrete walls to keep you company.

Many of us now suffer permanent damage to our mental, emotional and psychological well-being. Self-harm, suicide, a higher risk of recidivism, physical ailments and even a lower life expectancy, are all documented side effects of solitary confinement. Will there be accountability for the damages we have suffered?

Since announcing an end to disciplinary segregation, WDOC has continued to use solitary confinement as a means to punish, abuse and intimidate prisoners. This minor policy change will do nothing to stem the abuses meted out by this system of state violence.

Forgive those of us directly impacted by the violence of this system if we are reluctant to start handing out trophies and accolades. To do that, we need to see real change; until then, we will continue advocating from behind these walls to end the brutal practice of solitary confinement in all its forms.

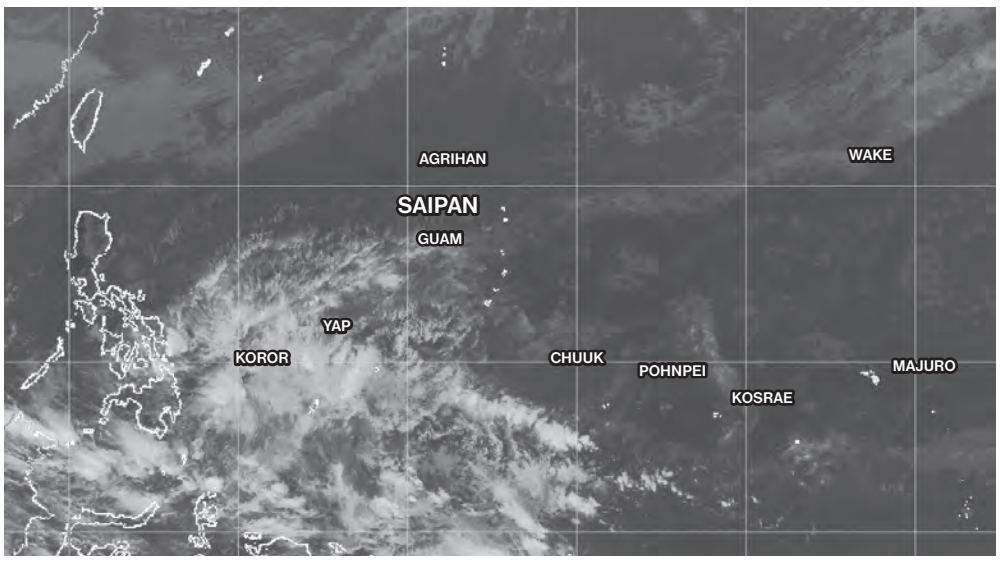
Christopher Blackwell is serving a forty-five-year prison sentence in Washington State. He co-founded Look 2 Justice and is currently working toward publishing a book on solitary confinement. This column was produced for The Progressive magazine and distributed by Tribune News Service.

The Weather

5-DAY FORECAST FOR SAIPAN AND TINIAN

TODAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
Sunny with a slight chance of showers. East winds 15 to 20 mph.	Mostly sunny with isolated light showers. Northeast winds 15 to 20 mph.	Mostly cloudy with scattered showers.	Partly cloudy with isolated light showers.	Partly cloudy with a slight chance of light showers.
86° 75°	87° 76°	85° 75°	85° 75°	85° 75°

YESTERDAY'S SATELLITE IMAGE



PICTURE TIME: 9:45 AM, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2021

Western North Pacific between equator and 25N from 130E to 180.

Fair weather persists across the region with little in terms of showers and cloudiness as seen on satellite imagery. Precipitable water amounts remain around 1 inch, further indicating a low potential for showers. Moderate to fresh east-northeast winds prevail across the region. Ipan buoy reveals seas 6 to 7 feet. Further east, altimetry data show seas closer to between 8 and 10 feet.

Satellite image and accompanying information are provided by the National Weather Service. For an updated weather forecast, visit the National Weather Service Guam homepage: www.prh.noaa.gov/guam/

MICRONESIA		▲ ▼ °F
Guam and Rota	Thunderstorms	86° / 78°
Palau	Thunderstorms	82° / 77°
Yap	Thunderstorms	84° / 78°
Chuuk	Thunderstorms	85° / 80°
Pohnpei	Thunderstorms	85° / 77°
Kosrae	Thunderstorms	85° / 77°
Majuro	Thunderstorms	83° / 79°

DAY	SUNRISE	SUNSET
Today	6:41 AM	5:57 PM
Saturday	6:42 AM	5:57 PM
Sunday	6:43 AM	5:58 PM
Monday	6:43 AM	5:58 PM
Tuesday	6:44 AM	5:59 PM

DAY	MOONRISE	MOONSET	MOONRISE
Today	3:39 AM	3:19 PM	-
Saturday	4:45 AM	4:17 PM	-
Sunday	5:53 AM	5:21 PM	-
Monday	7:00 AM	6:28 PM	-
Tuesday	8:03 AM	7:35 PM	-

AROUND THE GLOBE		▲ ▼ °F
Auckland	Partly Cloudy	75° / 63°
Beijing	Partly Cloudy	39° / 21°
Hong Kong	Sunny	73° / 59°
Honolulu	Partly Cloudy	81° / 70°
London	Rain	45° / 41°
Los Angeles	Sunny	79° / 52°
Manila	Partly Cloudy	86° / 73°
Melbourne	Mostly Cloudy	72° / 55°
Miami	Mostly Sunny	80° / 64°
New York	Mostly Cloudy	26° / 20°
Osaka	Mostly Sunny	52° / 39°
Paris	Rain	46° / 45°
Busan	Partly Cloudy	54° / 37°
Rome	Sunny	52° / 37°
Salem	Partly Cloudy	48° / 33°
San Francisco	Partly Cloudy	59° / 45°
Seoul	Partly Cloudy	41° / 28°
Tokyo	Mostly Sunny	50° / 36°
Washington, DC	Partly Cloudy	37° / 26°

TIDES: SAIPAN HARBOR TODAY		FEET
6:20 AM	High Tide	1.56
11:15 AM	Low Tide	0.97
4:43 PM	High Tide	1.87
-	-	-

FLIGHT SCHEDULE AS OF NOVEMBER 12, 2021

DEPARTURES

SAIPAN-GUAM (GUM)

UA117	7:20am	8:05am	2, 4, 6
UA117	9:50am	10:35am	1, 3, 5, 7

GUAM-MANILA (MNL)

UA183	8:00pm	9:50pm	Daily

SAIPAN-MANILA (MNL)

UA117/183	7:20am	9:50pm	2, 4, 6 via Guam
UA117/183	9:50am	9:50pm	1, 3, 5, 7 via Guam

SAIPAN-INCHEON (ICN)

7C3406	3:10PM	6:55PM	6
TW9308	3:20PM	8:00PM	4, 5
OZ6243	4:00PM	7:40PM	6

ARRIVALS

GUAM (GUM)-SAIPAN

UA116	5:30am	6:16am	2, 4, 6
UA174	8:00am	8:46am	1, 3, 5, 7

MANILA (MNL)-GUAM

UA184	10:40pm	4:30am+1	2, 5
UA184	10:55pm	4:45am+1	1, 3, 4, 6, 7

MANILA (MNL)-SAIPAN

UA184/174	10:40pm	6:16am+1	5 via Guam
UA184/174	10:40pm	8:46am+1	2 via Guam
UA184/174	10:55pm	6:16am+1	1, 3 via Guam
UA184/174	10:55pm	8:46am+1	4, 6, 7 via Guam

INCHEON (ICN)-SAIPAN

7C3405	8:30AM	2:10PM	6
OZ6233	9:00AM	2:30PM	6
TW9307	10:00AM	2:20PM	4, 5

LEGEND: Days: Monday (1), Tuesday (2), Wednesday (3), Thursday (4), Friday (5), Saturday (6) and Sunday (7); UA United Airlines • ETD: Estimated Time of Departure; ETA: Estimated Time of Arrival. *(The Saipan Tribune is not responsible for any changes in the schedule.)*

STOP THE SPREAD

The Governor's COVID-19 Task Force and Commonwealth Healthcare Corp. continue to encourage residents within the Marianas to practice social distancing, which means avoiding close contact with people in order to avoid catching the virus yourself and to avoid passing it on to others.

■ Stay home as much as possible. Avoid unnecessary travel or public places.

■ Avoid social gatherings in groups of more than 10.

■ Choose drive-thru, take-out, or delivery options, or outdoor seating, if available, when dining in.

■ Send only one healthy adult from the household run necessary errands, such as getting groceries or picking up medications. Leave children, elderly, and other vulnerable people at home as much as possible. When returning home from an errand, wash your hands before doing anything else.

■ Older adults and people with chronic medical conditions are at higher risk of getting very sick from this illness. People at high risk should stay at home as much as possible.

■ Create a household plan of action, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/checklisthousehold-ready.html

■ Ensure a 30-day supply of all medicines.

Continue good hand hygiene

■ Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water, avoid touching your face, cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue or your sleeve.

■ Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not readily available.

Know the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and what to do if you become symptomatic

■ Stay home when you are sick and if you recently traveled to a place with COVID-19. Self-quarantine means:

• Choosing a room in your house that can be used to separate sick household members from others.

• Washing your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

• Avoiding touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.

• Limiting visitors

CHCC appreciates the patience and understanding of the community at this time. To obtain general information about the CNMI COVID-19 response, contact the Governor's COVID-19 Task Force Hotline at 287-0046, 287-0489, 287-1089. These numbers are available Monday to Sunday, 7:30am - 4:30pm.

For medical information about COVID-19, reach out to the COVID-19 Infoline at the following numbers: 285-1672/1352. These numbers are available Monday to Friday, 7:30am - 4:30pm.

For mental health support and helpful tips during a crisis, call the Mental Health Support Line at 285-1856, 323-6560, 323-6561 These numbers are available Monday to Friday, 7:30am - 4:30 pm. For the 24/7 Disaster Distress Helpline, call SAMSHA at 1-800-985-5990.

For more information about DIY face coverings, visit https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover.html

For more information about CHCC programs, follow CHCC on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter at @cnmichcc, check out our website at www.chcc.gov.mp or call us at (670) 234-8950.

For more information on the Governor's COVID-19 Task Force, visit www.governor.gov.mpand, follow @GovernorCNMI on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

This health advisory may be found online at http://www.chcc.gov.mp/pressrelease.html and at www.governor.gov.mp/covid-19.

Rumor control

During crises like this, oftentimes the spread of misinformation is just as dangerous as the virus itself. The CNMI is reminded to only share official and verified notices, press releases, and advisories from the Governor's COVID-19 Task Force and CHCC.

Source: Office of the Governor

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SUBSCRIPTION Published Monday to Friday, Saipan Tribune offers door-to-door on-island delivery at an annual rate of $180. For additional subscription information, call (670) 235-8747 or 235-2769, or fax 235-3740.

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E-mail: sales@saipantribune.com

STAR MARIANAS AIR, INC.

FLIGHT SCHEDULE AS OF MAY 18, 2021

SAIPAN TO ROTA

FLIGHT #	DEPARTURE	ARRIVAL	FREQUENCY
1301	8:30AM	9:00AM	Daily
1302	11:00AM	11:30AM	Daily
1303	1:30PM	2:00PM	Tues/Wed/Thurs/Fri
1304	3:30PM	4:00PM	Daily

ROTA TO SAIPAN

FLIGHT #	DEPARTURE	ARRIVAL	FREQUENCY
3101	9:30AM	10:00AM	Daily
3102	12:00AM	12:30AM	Daily
3103	1:30PM	3:00PM	Tues/Wed/Thurs/Fri
3104	4:30PM	5:00PM	Daily

ROTA TO GUAM

FLIGHT #	DEPARTURE	ARRIVAL	FREQUENCY
3401	12:15	12:45	Temporarily Unavailable

GUAM TO ROTA

FLIGHT #	DEPARTURE	ARRIVAL	FREQUENCY
4301	13:00	13:30	Temporarily Unavailable

SAIPAN TO TINIAN

FLIGHT #	DEPARTURE	ARRIVAL	FREQUENCY
1201	7:00	7:15	Temporarily Unavailable
1202	8:00	8:15	Daily
1203	9:00	9:15	Daily
1204	10:00	10:15	Daily
1205	11:00	11:15	Daily
1206	12:00	12:15	Temporarily Unavailable
1207	13:00	13:15	Temporarily Unavailable
1208	14:00	14:15	Daily
1209	15:00	15:15	Daily
1210	16:00	16:15	Daily
1211	17:00	17:15	Daily
1212	17:00	17:15	Temporarily Unavailable

TINIAN TO SAIPAN

FLIGHT #	DEPARTURE	ARRIVAL	FREQUENCY
2101	7:30	7:45	Temporarily Unavailable
2102	8:30	8:45	Daily
2103	9:30	9:45	Daily
2104	10:30	10:45	Daily
2105	11:30	11:45	Daily
2106	12:30	12:45	Temporarily Unavailable
2107	13:30	13:45	Temporarily Unavailable
2108	14:30	14:45	Daily
2109	15:30	15:45	Daily
2110	16:30	16:45	Daily
2111	17:30	17:45	Daily
2112	18:30	18:45	Temporarily Unavailable

Falling fuel prices will result in FAC cut effective Jan. 1

The Commonwealth Utilities Corp. has been notified by its fuel supplier, Mobil Oil Mariana Islands Inc., that there has been a decrease in the average international fuel oil prices that will affect the Fuel Adjustment Charge. As a result, the current FAC rate of $0.23296 per kilowatt-hour will decrease to $0.20909 per kWh effective Jan. 1, 2022.

The FAC is one of two components that make up the CUC electric kWh rate, which is used to purchase fuel. The second component is the CUC base rate, which is used to fund operations, projects, and debt service. This base rate has not been increased since April 17, 2014.

CUC is required, pursuant to an order previously issued by the Commonwealth Public Utilities Commission, to adjust (up or down) the FAC pass-through rate when the Mean of Platts Singapore monthly pricing equals or exceeds a 4.5% differential of the average per gallon cost of fuel used in the calculation of the current FAC rate.

CUC first instituted the Levelized Energy Adjustment Clause in 2009 to recover fuel and fuel related costs, a system also used by power providers in Guam and the Virgin Islands. In May 2015, the CPUC authorized CUC to change the name of LEAC to FAC to provide customers a more accurate description of the electric rate. ***(PR)***

New 0.75M-gallon San Vicente water tank now in use

The new 0.75-million-gallon pre-stressed concrete San Vicente water tank was commissioned and placed into service yesterday, according to a Commonwealth Utilities Corp. news release.

The news release said this new water tank will provide more reliable 24-hour water services to the following areas: San Vicente, Upper Dandan Homestead, Naftan, and Obyan.

As part of yesterday's commissioning process, CUC made adjustments to the tank's new pressure sustaining valve to help pressurize the higher elevations in the San Vicente (near Standford). The areas served may experience intermittent services over the next 24-hours as CUC makes the adjustments to the water distribution system.

"It's a great project that is now completed as it will bring improvements to the CUC water system and improved water services to the consumers in this tank service area," said CUC executive director Gary Camacho.

This project is the third prestressed concrete water tank constructed and funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, with the Papago water tank being the first, then the As Terlaje water tank and now the new San Vicente water tank.

"Additionally, as part of CUC's resiliency program, CUC is working on the designs for the construction of three new pre-stressed concrete water tanks for the Kagman, Dandan and Tinian service areas. These new water tanks are funded through the Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Relief," Camacho added.

For more information, contact the CUC Hotline (664-4282) or monitor its Facebook page for the latest updates (https://www.facebook.com/CommonwealthUtilitiesCorporation/). ***(PR)***



WINNING ARTWORK

Artwork by Pacifica Insurance Underwriters, Inc's 8th Annual Pacifica Art Contest category 2 winner Austin Reyes from Dandan Middle School. This year's theme: "Stay COVID-19 free." For contest information, log on to www.pacificains.com/artcontest and follow Pacifica's Facebook and Instagram accounts. Artworks are on display at their office in Susupe for public viewing.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

WANTED!

Are you interested in ocean conservation activities and the preservation of culture?
Do you have a passion for communications?
If you are passionate about community development and have an entrepreneurial spirit, then this might just be the job you've been dreaming about but thought too good to be true!

Communications Manager
Part-time

The successful candidate will have a bachelor's degree in journalism, public relations, communications, marketing, or related field plus a minimum of 5 years of relevant experience. You will have significant experience working with multiple forms of media and membership services. You likely have experience starting a business, civic club, or project from the ground up. Your job will be overseeing, executing, and managing communications for the organization and several of our projects as well as developing and implementing organizational strategies. You will know the importance of deadlines and be responsible for developing, managing, and implementing multiple task schedules.

Requirements – A passion for our mission to help educate everyone in our community learn about ocean and marine science and the urgent need to care for our precious resources.

Excellent communications skills and superb organizational skills. Others would say that you have a positive "can-do" attitude and that you were their favorite, productive team player. You will be able to demonstrate proven experience with self-motivation and the ability to work without supervision.

You are not asking what to do next but devising ways to accomplish goals in a manner that the Executive Director can approve of easily.

If you are interested, send an email to info@friendsmarianatrench.org with the subject line "Comms Manager". Indicate why you are interested and attach your resume. Also include three references and their contact info. Preference given to individuals who are fluent in Chamorro and/or Carolinian languages. This position is funded by a grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

COMMONWEALTH PORTS AUTHORITY
MAIN OFFICE: SAIPAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, 2ND FLOOR ARRIVAL BLDG.
P.O. BOX 501055, SAIPAN, MP 96950
PHONE: (1-670) 237-6500/1 | FAX: (1-670) 234-5962
WEBSITE: WWW.CNMIPORTS.COM

REQUEST FOR QUALIFICATION STATEMENTS FOR ARCHITECTURAL/ENGINEERING DESIGN SERVICES

FRANCISCO C. ADA/SAIPAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT PERIMETER SECURITY FENCE REPLACEMENT PROJECT NO. CPA-SA-002-22 (AIP PENDING)

The Commonwealth Ports Authority's (CPA) is a public corporation and autonomous agency of the Government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). In accordance with its Procurement Rules and Regulations, CPA is soliciting statements of professional qualifications from interested Consultants for Architectural and Engineering (A/E) Design Services for the replacement of the perimeter security fencing at the Francisco C. Ada/Saipan International Airport, Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands, Project No. CPA-SA-002-22 (AIP pending).

The project is being funded by U.S. Federal Aviation Administration and is in accordance and compliance with CPA's Procurement Rules and Regulations, Section 40-50-202, Architect-Engineer Design and Construction Management Services.

The Request for Qualification (RFQ) Package is available at CPA's Administration Office, 2nd floor of the arrival terminal at the Francisco C. Ada/Saipan International Airport. No fee is required for obtaining the proposal package. Electronic copies may be made available upon written request to Ms. Wendi Prater at wprater@cnmiports.com or Ms. Angie Aguigui at angie.aguigui@cnmiports.com.

Questions regarding this request for RFQ statements must be submitted to Ms. Prater, CPA's Executive Assistant/Project Manager, via email to wprater@cnmiports.com or hand delivered to the CPA Administration Office by no later than 5:00 p.m. CHST, local time, Monday, December 20, 2021.

The statements of professional qualification will be evaluated based on the criteria available in the RFQ package.

Interested Consultants are requested to submit one (1) original, four (4) copies and one (1) electronic version in .pdf of their statements of professional qualifications no later than **5:00 p.m. CHST, TUESDAY, JANUARY 4, 2022**. Statements of qualification must be presented by a combination of both brochures and the use of current U.S. Government Standard Form 330.

The CPA reserves the right to reject any or all statements of professional qualification for any reason, if in its sole opinion to do so would be in its best interest.

CHRISTOPHER S. TENORIO
Executive Director
Date: December 2, 2021

JOB VACANCY ANNOUNCEMENT

NAME OF EMPLOYER: Kang Corporation

THE POSITION: Accountant

JOB DESCRIPTION: General Duties: Analyzes financial information and prepare financial reports to determine or maintain records of assets, liabilities, profits and loss, tax liability or other financial activities within the organization; and Performs professional operating or cost accounting work requiring knowledge of the theory and practice of recording, classifying, examining, and analyzing the data and records of financial transactions. Specific Duties: Analyzes the effects of transactions upon account relationships; Evaluates alternative means of treating transactions; Plans the way account structures should be developed or modified; Assures the adequacy of the accounting system as the basis for reporting to management; Considers the need for new or changed controls; Projects accounting data to show the effects of proposed plans on capital investments, income, cash position, and overall financial condition; Interprets the meaning of accounting records, reports, and statements; Advises management on accounting matters; and Recommends improvements, adaptations, or revisions in the accounting system and procedures.

MINIMUM QUALIFICATION REQUIREMENTS:
EDUCATION: Must have a Bachelor's Degree in Accounting.
EXPERIENCE: Must have at least 24 months of relevant work experience as an Accountant.
SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS: Must be knowledgeable on the use of various accounting softwares; Must be computer literate; and Must possess excellent written and verbal communication skills.

JOB SITE: Amare Pl Pale Arnold Road, Chalan Laulau, Saipan, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

HOW TO APPLY: Submit or mail comprehensive resume and/or application letter to: KANG HEE KIM, President, Kang Corporation.

Office Address: Amare Pl Pale Arnold Road,
Chalan Laulau Saipan,
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands
Mailing Address: P.O. Box 503053, Saipan, MP 96950
Email Address: kangparts@hotmail.com
Telephone Number: Tel. 1(670) 235-9369

COMMONWEALTH PORTS AUTHORITY
MAIN OFFICE: SAIPAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, 2ND FLOOR ARRIVAL BLDG.
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WEBSITE: WWW.CNMIPORTS.COM

REQUEST FOR QUALIFICATION STATEMENTS FOR CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT SERVICES

FRANCISCO C. ADA/SAIPAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT ARFF RAPID REFILL IMPROVEMENTS AIP 3-69-0002-93/XX

The Commonwealth Ports Authority's (CPA) is a public corporation and autonomous agency of the Government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). In accordance with its Procurement Rules and Regulations, CPA hereby seeks the services of qualified consulting firms to provide Construction Management Services for the Francisco C. Ada/Saipan International Airport ARFF Rapid Refill Improvements Project, AIP 3-69-0002-93/XX.

The project is being funded by U.S. Federal Aviation Administration and is in accordance and compliance with CPA's Procurement Rules and Regulations, Section 40-50-202, Architect-Engineer Design and Construction Management Services.

The Request for Qualification (RFQ) Package is available at CPA's Administration Office, 2nd floor of the arrival terminal at the Francisco C. Ada/Saipan International Airport. No fee is required for obtaining the RFQ package. Electronic copies may be made available upon written request to Ms. Angie Aguigui at angie.aguigui@cnmiports.com or Ms. Wendi Prater at wprater@cnmiports.com.

Questions regarding this request for qualification statements must be submitted to Ms. Wendi L. Prater, CPA Executive Assistant/Project Manager, via email to wprater@cnmiports.com or hand delivered to the CPA Administration Office by no later than 5:00 p.m. CHST, local time, Monday, December 20, 2021.

The statements of professional qualification will be evaluated based on the criteria available in the RFQ package.

Interested Consultants are requested to submit one (1) original, four (4) copies and one (1) electronic version in .pdf of their statements of professional qualifications no later than **5:00 p.m. CHST, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 5, 2022**. Statements of qualification must be presented by a combination of both brochures and the use of current U.S. Government Standard Form 330.

The CPA reserves the right to reject any or all statements of professional qualification for any reason, if in its sole opinion to do so would be in its best interest.

CHRISTOPHER S. TENORIO
Executive Director
Date: December 2, 2021

COMMONWEALTH PORTS AUTHORITY
Main Office: SAIPAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT
P.O. BOX 501055 • SAIPAN • MP 96950-1055
Phone: (670) 237-6500 Fax: (670) 234-5962
E-Mail Address: cpa.admin@pticom.com • Website: www.cnmiports.com

JOB VACANCY ANNOUNCEMENT # 06-2021
Opening date: December 17, 2021 Closing date: January 07, 2022

Positions:

SAIPAN:
(1) Baggage Handling Systems (BHS) Technician
(1) General Maintenance I
(1) Ports Police Officer I

ROTA:
(1) Maintenance/Custodial-I (CPA Rota)
(1) AOA Controller/Ground Maintenance I

TINIAN:
(1) General Maintenance I
(1) AOA Controller/Ground Maintenance

Employment Application must be accompanied with a copy of all required diploma/certificates and/or official sealed transcripts, original copy of recent police record not more than six (6) months old, original copy of U.S. Department of Defense Form DD214 for retired members or veterans of our Armed Forces, and other documents as required for the position. Public Law 11-70 requires that all male applicants age 18 to 25 years old must submit documentation evidencing his registration with the Federal Selective Service System. All applications and required documents must be submitted to the ***CPA Administration Office, 2nd Floor Arrival Building, Francisco C. Ada/Saipan International Airport or CPA Administration Office Tinian International Airport or Benjamin Taisacan Manglona International Airport.*** Failure to provide any of the required documents will result in automatic disqualification. Certain vacancies may require written and/or physical test. Selected applicants will be subjected to pre-employment drug screening, 10-year Criminal History Record Check and 49 CFR Part 1542.209(d) Requirements. CPA reserves the right to waive or implement other qualifications to meet its needs. The deadline for submission of applications and required documents to the CPA Administration Office (Saipan) or at the Tinian International Airport or Benjamin Taisacan Manglona International Airport is no later than ***5:00 P.M. on Friday, January 7, 2022***.

Detailed information on qualifications and position descriptions for the above positions may be picked up along with the application form from Monday-Friday, 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., except on holidays, at the CPA Administration Office (2nd Floor) of the Francisco C. Ada/Saipan International Airport, Arrival Terminal or CPA Admin. Office at the Tinian International Airport or at the Benjamin Taisacan Manglona International Airport. For additional information, please contact the CPA Human Resources Office by email at lorna.tenorio@cnmiports.com or by phone at (670)237-6500.

CPA is an Equal Opportunity Employer and CPA hires those who are legally entitled to employment in the CNMI.

CHRISTOPHER S. TENORIO
Executive Director

Business

More flight cancellations



AP

Travelers walk through Terminal 3 at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, Ill., Tuesday, Dec. 28, 2021.

NEW YORK (AP)—Hundreds of flights were cancelled Wednesday as the omicron variant creates havoc both for travelers and for airlines that are having to cobble together flight crews as pilots, flight attendants and ground crews become infected or are exposed to others who have been.

More than 850 flights were cancelled by midday Wednesday and that number has ticked higher throughout the day, according to data from the flight-tracking website FlightAware. There were nearly 1,300 cancellations for flights entering, leaving or inside the U.S. Tuesday, and about 1,500 on Monday.

Cancellations began to spike the day before Christmas during what is already a buzzing pace for airlines this time of year.

Delta, United and JetBlue have all said that the omicron variant was causing enough staffing issues that flights were cancelled.

SkyWest led U.S. carriers with 195 cancellations, followed by United with 158 and Delta with 103. SkyWest, a regional airline based in Utah, has suffered an elevated level of cancellations after severe weather hit several of its hubs, but it's reporting the same staffing issues due to COVID-19.

The Pacific Northwest was slammed with cold and heavy snow over the weekend. Among U.S. airports, Seattle-Tacoma had the highest percentage of incoming and outgoing flights cancelled Wednesday, according to FlightAware.

Omicron has intensified already significant staffing issues for airlines, which winnowed workforces in 2020 as air travel collapsed, only to be broadsided when vaccination rates jumped and millions of people felt comfortable flying again this year.

That could translate to travel headaches for hundreds of thousands of people if cancellations maintain the current pace into the weekend. The Transportation Security Administration expects the Monday after New Year's will be one of the busiest days of the holiday season.

According to TSA checkpoint data, the numbers of people flying this holiday season far exceeds last year—before COVID-19 vaccinations were available—but still trails 2019 traveler numbers.

BUSINESS BRIEFS

Nevada casinos go record 9 months with $1B in house winnings

LAS VEGAS (AP)—Nevada casinos set a record in November, reporting a ninth straight month of $1 billion or more in house winnings, gambling regulators said Wednesday, providing another sign that business in the nation's tourist-dependent gambling mecca has returned to pre-pandemic levels. The $1.32 billion in casino winnings reported statewide last month was up from $1.22 billion in October, and almost reached the record $1.36 billion figure set last July, the Nevada Gaming Control Board reported. The streak beat the previous record of eight consecutive months set before the Great Recession, from October 2006 to May 2007, board senior analyst Michael Lawton said. Nevada sports betting also set records—reaping a record $72 million in November on sports wagers totaling $1.1 billion.

Publix grocery chain starts offering paid parental leave

LAKELAND, Fla. (AP)—The Publix grocery store chain will start offering paid parental leave to employees who are new parents, company officials announced Wednesday. Eligible full-time and part-time workers will be able to take off the time during the first year of the birth or adoption of a child, starting with the new year, the Florida-based company said. The new benefits come as retailers across the U.S. are facing a worker shortage, and some are offering new benefits to attract or retain workers. St. Louis-based Schnucks recently gave its grocery store workers a one-time retention bonus of $600. "Publix is committed to being a great place to work, and we frequently review our benefits to continually offer a comprehensive package to our associates," Maria Brous, Publix's communications director said in an email.

More cruise ships under CDC investigation due to COVID cases

MIAMI (AP)—The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is investigating more cruise ships due to new cases of COVID-19 as the omicron variant drives extremely high infection levels in the industry hub of Florida. The CDC said 88 vessels are now either under investigation or observation, but it did not specify how many COVID-19 cases have been reported. Four other vessels are also being monitored by the CDC as well. Florida hit a new record for daily cases on Tuesday with 46,900 new cases in a day. Since Christmas, the state's 7-day average of daily cases has surpassed previous records set during last summer's surge, rising to 29,400 infections. Coronavirus hospitalizations in the state have also risen from about 1,200 patients two weeks ago to about 3,400 on Wednesday. But that is still less than one-fifth the number of hospitalizations reported in late August due to the delta wave.

Nation

New COVID cases in US soar to the highest levels on record

CHICAGO (AP)—More than a year after the vaccine was rolled out, new cases of COVID-19 in the U.S. have soared to their highest level on record at over 265,000 per day on average, a surge driven largely by the highly contagious omicron variant.

New cases per day have more than doubled over the past two weeks, eclipsing the old mark of 250,000, set in mid-January, according to data kept by Johns Hopkins University.

The fast-spreading mutant version of the virus has cast a pall over Christmas and New Year's, forcing communities to scale back or call off their festivities just weeks after it seemed as if Americans were about to enjoy an almost normal holiday season. Thousands of flights have been canceled amid staffing shortages blamed on the virus.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious-disease expert, said Wednesday that there is no need to cancel small home gatherings among vaccinated and boosted family and friends.

But "if your plans are to go to a 40- to 50-person New Year's Eve party with all the bells and whistles and everybody hugging and kissing and wishing each other a happy new year, I would strongly recommend that this year we not do that," he said.

The threat of omicron and the desire to spend the holidays with friends and loved ones have spurred many Americans to get tested for COVID-19.

Aravindh Shankar, 24, flew to San Jose, California, on Christmas from West Lafayette, Indiana, to be with family. Though he felt fine, he decided to get tested Wednesday just to play it safe, since he had been on an airplane.

He and his family spent almost an entire day searching for a testing appointment for him before he went to a site in a parking lot next to the San Jose airport.

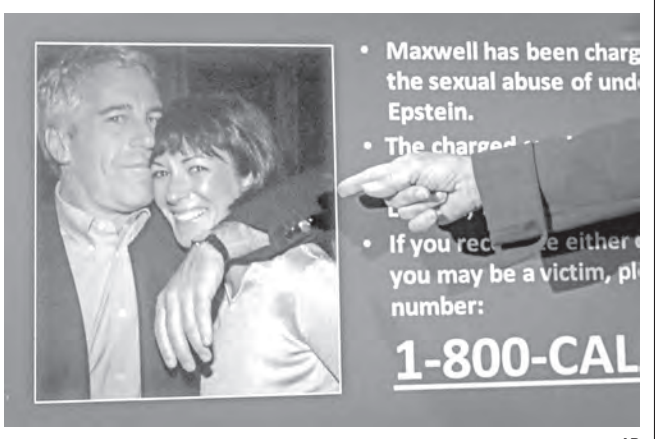
"It was actually surprisingly hard," Shankar said about trying to find a test. "Some people have it harder for sure."

The picture is grim elsewhere around the world, especially in Europe, with World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus saying he is worried about omicron combining with the delta variant to produce a "tsunami" of cases. That, he said, will put "immense pressure on exhausted health workers and health systems on the brink of collapse."

The number of Americans now in the hospital with COVID-19 is running at around 60,000, or about half the figure seen in January, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported.

Ghislaine Maxwell convicted in Epstein sex abuse

NEW YORK (AP)—The British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell was convicted Wednesday of luring teenage girls to be sexually abused by the American millionaire Jeffrey Epstein.



AP

Audrey Strauss, acting U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, points to a photo of Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell, during a news conference in New York on July 2, 2020.

The verdict capped a monthlong trial featuring sordid accounts of the sexual exploitation of girls as young as 14, told by four women who described being abused as teens in the 1990s and early 2000s at Epstein's palatial homes in Florida, New York and New Mexico.

Jurors deliberated for five full days before finding Maxwell guilty of five of six counts. With the maximum prison terms for each charge ranging from five to 40 years in prison, Maxwell faces the likelihood of years behind bars—an outcome long sought by women who spent years fighting in civil courts to hold her accountable for her role in recruiting and grooming Epstein's teenage victims and sometimes joining in the sexual abuse.

As the verdict was read, Maxwell was largely stoic behind a black mask. Afterward, she could be seen pouring herself water as one of her attorneys patted her back. She stood with her hands folded as the jury filed out, and glanced at her siblings—faithfully in attendance each day of the trial—as she herself was led from the courtroom. She did not hug her lawyers on the way out, a marked change from previous days during which Maxwell and her team were often physically affectionate with one another.

One of her victims, Annie Farmer, said she was grateful the jury recognized Maxwell's "pattern of predatory behavior."

"She has caused hurt to many more women than the few of us who had the chance to testify in the courtroom," she said in a prepared statement. "I hope that this verdict brings solace to all who need it and demonstrates that no one is above the law. Even those with great power and privilege will be held accountable when they sexually abuse and exploit the young."

No sentencing date was set.

The defense had insisted Maxwell was a victim of a vindictive prosecution devised to deliver justice to women deprived of their main villain when Epstein killed himself while awaiting trial in 2019.

Her brother, Kevin Maxwell, said the family believes she will be vindicated on appeal. "We firmly believe in our sister's innocence," he said in a written statement.

During the trial, prosecutors called 24 witnesses to give jurors a picture of life inside Epstein's homes—a subject of public fascination and speculation ever since his 2006 arrest in Florida in a child sex case.

Asia

Dismantling democracy in Hong Kong this year

HONG KONG (AP)—As the days of 2021 dwindled, so did any remaining traces of democracy in Hong Kong.

On Wednesday, a vocal pro-democracy media outlet—one of the last openly critical voices in the city—closed after a police raid. Earlier in December, the opposition was shut out from elections under a new law that puts all candidates to a loyalty test. And monuments commemorating the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 were taken down.

Again and again throughout the year, the city's authorities and the central government in Beijing stamped out nearly everything the pro-democracy movement had stood for. Activists fled abroad or were locked up under the draconian National Security Law imposed on the city 18 months ago. Unions and other independent organizations closed down.

Where once Hong Kong allowed "open opposition and questioning of the government's core policies and legitimacy ... any meaningful policy debates will now take place among a small circle of government loyalists," said Kurt Tong, partner at The Asia Group and former U.S. consul general in Hong Kong and Macao.

The days when the former British colony was considered a bastion of freedom fade in memory. Returned to China in 1997, Hong Kong has endured an overhaul of its political system and a crackdown on political dissent. Authorities sought to suppress antigovernment sentiment that led to months of political strife in 2019.

The most recent example was Wednesday's raid by Hong Kong police on the online pro-democracy news outlet Stand News. Seven people were arrested—among them two current and former editors and four former board members, including a popular singer, Denise Ho—for alleged sedition under a colonial-era ordinance.

The outlet announced that afternoon that it would halt operations.

Stand News is the second media outlet to shut down after being targeted by Hong Kong authorities. The Apple Daily newspaper closed earlier in 2021 after authorities raided its offices for a second time and froze millions in assets.

"Democracy has been under a sustained assault for well over a year in Hong Kong," said Luke de Pulford, a coordinator for the London-based Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, a group of legislators from democratic countries focused on relations with China. "No democracy can function without a free press."

"If no critical information is able to be published about the administration in Hong Kong or in China, then what last vestiges of democracy there were, I think we have to say, have been snuffed out."

In a string of tweets, Hong Kong activist Nathan Law called upon the world to "publish about Hong Kong ... (and) about the brave journalists who risk so much." Law, who fled to London after the security law was implemented, said he feared "a domino effect" that would lead other outlets to close.

Little remains of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement. More than 100 pro-democracy figures and others have been arrested under the security law, which penalizes actions seen as separatist or subverting the Hong Kong or Chinese governments.

That includes 47 people charged with subversion in February over their roles in an unofficial primary election held in 2020 to determine the best candidates to field in planned legislative elections.

Authorities accused the activists of subversion, saying they planned to win a majority and use it to paralyze the government and eventually force Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam to step down.

The government postponed the 2020 elections, citing public health risks from COVID-19. Then, the central government in Beijing announced new election laws earlier this year that reduced the proportion of directly elected seats to less than a quarter and required all candidates to be loyal to Beijing.

The results were predictable: Earlier this month, when the election finally was held, pro-Beijing lawmakers won a landslide victory. The city's largest opposition party, the Democratic Party, fielded no candidates for the first time since the 1997 handover.

Several pro-democracy trade unions and organizations have also been dissolved this year. The city's largest teachers' union disbanded in August due to the political climate, followed later by the city's largest independent trade union.



University students clean the "Pillar of Shame" statue, a memorial for those killed in the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, at the University of Hong Kong, June 4, 2019. AP

World



World Health Organisation Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus waves as he arrives for a meeting of G20 finance and health ministers at the Salone delle Fontane (Hall of Fountains) in Rome, Oct. 29, 2021. AP

WHO chief frets about tsunami of omicron, delta COVID cases

BERLIN (AP)—The head of the World Health Organization said Wednesday that he's worried about the omicron and delta variants of COVID-19 producing a "tsunami" of cases between them, but he's still hopeful that the world will put the worst of the pandemic behind it in 2022.

Two years after the coronavirus first emerged, top officials with the U.N. health agency cautioned that it's still too early to be reassured by initial data suggesting that omicron, the latest variant, leads to milder disease. First reported last month in southern Africa, it is already the dominant variant in the United States and parts of Europe.

And after 92 of the WHO's 194 member countries missed a target to vaccinate 40% of their populations by the end of this year, Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus urged everyone to make a "new year's resolution" to get behind a campaign to vaccinate 70% of countries' populations by the beginning of July.

According to WHO's figures, the number of COVID-19 cases recorded worldwide increased by 11% last week compared with the previous week, with nearly 4.99 million newly reported from Dec. 20-26. New cases in Europe—which accounted for more than half of the total—were up 3% while those in the Americas rose 39% and there was a 7% increase in Africa. The global gain followed a gradual increase since October.

"I'm highly concerned that omicron, being more transmissible (and) circulating at the same time as delta, is leading to a tsunami of cases," Tedros said at an online news conference. That, he said, will put "immense pressure on exhausted health workers and health systems on the brink of collapse."

WHO said in its weekly epidemiological report that the "overall risk" related to omicron "remains very high." It cited "consistent evidence" that it has a growth advantage over the delta variant.

It noted that a decline in case incidence has been seen in South Africa, and that early data from that country, the U.K. and Denmark suggest a reduced risk of hospitalization with omicron, but said that more data is needed.

WHO's emergencies chief, Dr. Michael Ryan, underlined that note of caution. He said it will be important in coming weeks to "suppress transmission of both variants to the minimum that we can."

Ryan said that omicron infections began largely among young people, "but what we haven't seen is the omicron wave fully established in the broader population. And I'm a little nervous to make positive predictions until we see how well the vaccine protection is going to work in those older and more vulnerable populations."

WORLD BRIEFS

Gun attack in Mexico kills 8 at two homes, including baby

MEXICO CITY (AP)—A shooting attack in north-central Mexico killed eight people at two homes including a baby boy, authorities said Wednesday. They said the assailants apparently targeted four men who were at one home, killing them and a woman. Local media said the house on the outskirts of the city of Silao may have been used by drug addicts. Another man wounded in the attack on the home late Tuesday died of his wound Wednesday. Guanajuato state prosecutors said three other people were wounded and were in serious condition at local hospitals. At a nearby house, police found a 16-year-old girl and a 16-month-old boy dead of gunshot wounds. It was unclear if they also were targeted or had simply been hit by stray bullets from the first shooting, officials said.

Panama sentences two men in 2020 killings of 7 young people

PANAMA CITY (AP)—Two men were given long prison terms Wednesday for killing seven young people in 2020, bloodshed that shocked this country where mass slayings are rare. Prosecutors said Reynaldo Cuadra McBean was sentenced to 50 years and Jean Carlos Hernandez was sentenced to serve 36 years for their convictions on homicide, abduction, aggravated robbery and other charges. The court found them guilty on Dec. 15. Authorities have never offered a motive for the killings on July 17, 2020. Relatives found the bodies of the four women and three men between the ages of 17 and 22 near Lake Gatun after they did not return from an outing. The youths were among 13 who had gone to the lake that day. Five of the bodies were found in an abandoned military bunker probably dating from the time of U.S. control of the Panama Canal. Investigators said the bodies bore signs of bullet wounds.

Science & Technology



In this image released by NASA, Arianespace's Ariane 5 rocket with NASA's James Webb Space Telescope onboard, lifts off Saturday, Dec. 25, 2021, at Europe's Spaceport, the Guiana Space Center in Kourou, French Guiana. The $10 billion infrared observatory is intended as the successor to the aging Hubble Space Telescope. NASA VIA AP

Space telescope launched on daring quest to behold 1st stars

By MARCIA DUNN
AP AEROSPACE WRITER

The world's largest and most powerful space telescope rocketed away Saturday on a high-stakes quest to behold light from the first stars and galaxies and scour the universe for hints of life.

NASA's James Webb Space Telescope soared from French Guiana on South America's northeastern coast, riding a European Ariane rocket into the Christmas morning sky.

"What an amazing Christmas present," said Thomas Zurbuchen, NASA's science mission chief.

The $10 billion observatory hurtled toward its destination 1 million miles (1.6 million kilometers) away, or more than four times beyond the moon. It will take a month to get there and another five months before its infrared eyes are ready to start scanning the cosmos.

First, the telescope's enormous mirror and sunshield need to unfurl; they were folded origami-style to fit into the rocket's nose cone. Otherwise, the observatory won't be able to peer back in time 13.7 billion years as anticipated, within a mere 100 million years of the universe-forming Big Bang.

NASA Administrator Bill Nelson called Webb a time machine that will provide "a better understanding of our universe and our place in it: who we are, what we are, the search that's eternal."

"We are going to discover incredible things that we never imagined," Nelson said following liftoff, speaking from Florida's Kennedy Space Center. But he cautioned: "There are still innumerable things that have to work and they have to work perfectly ... we know that in great reward there is great risk."

Intended as a successor to the aging Hubble Space Telescope, the long-delayed James Webb is named after NASA's administrator during the 1960s. NASA partnered with the European and Canadian space agencies to build and launch the new 7-ton telescope, with thousands of people from 29 countries working on it since the 1990s.

With the launch falling on Christmas and a global surge in COVID-19 cases, there were fewer spectators at the French Guiana launch site than expected. Nelson bowed out along with a congressional delegation and many contractors who worked on the telescope.

Around the world, astronomers and countless others tuned in, anxious to see Webb finally taking flight after years of setbacks. Last-minute technical snags bumped the launch nearly a week, then gusty wind pushed it to Christmas. A few of the launch controllers wore Santa caps in celebration.

"We have delivered a Christmas gift today for humanity," said European Space Agency director general Josef Aschbacher. He described it as a special moment, but added: "It's very nerve-racking. I couldn't do launches every single day. This would not be good for my life expectancy."

Cheers and applause erupted in and outside Launch Control following Webb's flawless launch, with jubilant scientists embracing one another amid shouts of "Go Webb!" and signs that read: "Bon Voyage Webb."

Cameras on the rocket's upper stage provided one last glimpse of the shimmering telescope against a backdrop of Earth, before it sped away. "That picture will be burned into my mind forever," Zurbuchen told journalists.

The telescope's showpiece: a gold-plated mirror more than 21 feet (6.5 meters) across.

Protecting the observatory is a wispy, five-layered sunshield, vital for keeping the light-gathering mirror and heat-sensing infrared detectors at subzero temperatures. At 70 feet by 46 feet (21 meters by 14 meters), it's the size of a tennis court.

If all goes well, the sunshield will be opened three days after liftoff, taking at least five days to unfold and lock into place. Next, the mirror segments should open up like the leaves of a drop-leaf table, 12 days or so into the flight.

In all, hundreds of release mechanisms need to work—perfectly—in order for the telescope to succeed. Such a complex series of actions is unprecedented—"like nothing we've done before," noted NASA program director Greg Robinson.

"Now it's our job to start from here and keep going," said Massimo Stiavelli, an astronomer who heads the Webb mission office at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore. The institute serves as the control hub for Hubble and, now, Webb.

This new year, help our sea turtles with a resolution to keep your favorite beach clean

We all benefit from clean beaches—even sea turtles. A resolution to keep the beach clean is helpful to turtles and easy to keep!



Consider these ideas when making your resolution

- Organize monthly clean-ups. By yourself or with friends—it adds up and can be a lot of fun! Look for public cleanups to join as well!
- If you use the beach, clean the beach! Especially during the holidays, celebrations, and other large gatherings.
- Reduce plastic usage and keep plastic off the beach—consider reusable items (water bottles, bags, straw, utensils, and more)
- Leash your dog on the beach and pick-up after them. They can scare nesting turtles or harm eggs and hatchlings

Happy New Year! from the CNMI Sea Turtle Program

NOAA FISHERIES 150 YEARS

Call 670- 287-8537 to report any poaching of, nesting, or stranded sea turtles

Find us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to learn more about the CNMI Sea Turtle Program

DIVISION OF COASTAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

P. O. Box 501304, Saipan MP 96950 | Gualo Rai Center, Saipan
TEL. NO. 664-8300 | FAX NO. 664-8315
www.dcrm.gov.mp

NOTICE OF APPLICATION

As of December 31, 2021

THE FOLLOWING IS A PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT OF COASTAL PERMIT APPLICATIONS RECEIVED BY THE DCRM OFFICE:

APPLICANT	DATE APPLICATION RECEIVED	APPLICATION PROJECT DESCRIPTION	LOCATION	TYPE	STATUS
1. Commonwealth Ports Authority	10/22/2021 TMS-97-X-294-A1	Tinian Airport Parking Lot Expansion	Tinian	Major Siting	Public Hearing 01/25/2022
2. LK Corporation dba YSE Engineering	12/1/2021 SS-2022-009	Sugar Dock Facility Soil Investigaton	Chalan Kanoa	Shoreline	Approved* 12/22/2021
3. Commonwealth Utilities Corporation	12/2/2021 SW-2022-010	Lower MIHA Sewer Replacement Project	Garapan	Wetlands & Mangroves	Approved* 12/20/2021
4. Saipan Crewboats, Inc.	12/22/2021 SPIm-2022-011	Dry-Dock of C/B Leatherneck	Lowerbase	Ports & Industrial	Under Review*
5. Micronesia Resort Inc. dba Kensington Hotel Saipan	12/29/2021 SLRm-2022-012	Aqua Park Inflatable Replacement	San Roque	Lagoon & Reef	Under Review*

NMIAC §15-10-210 of the CRM Rules and Regulations requires all permit applications to be published in a newspaper for general circulation within the CNMI within 15 days of receipt of application. The list reflects recently received permit applications and those with a recent change in status. New applications are marked with an asterisk (*).

The Public is invited to submit written comments regarding any of the above projects for which a permit decision has not been issued. All permit comments should identify the project by application number. Your comments should be mailed or hand-delivered to the DCRM Office. All persons who desire a public hearing regarding any project may do so by submitting a written request for a public hearing to the DCRM Office within fourteen (14) days for minor permits (APCs) and proposed amended major sitings. Public Hearings are required for all new major siting projects. All public hearing notices are published in a local newspaper of general circulation. Residents of Rota and Tinian may submit comments and hearing requests to their local DCRM Coordinator. Persons wishing to retain the right to appeal a DCRM Permit decision must file a notice of appeal with the DCRM office within thirty (30) days of the issuance of the DCRM permit decision as provided in Part 200 § 15-10-235 of the DCRM Regulations.

Off the Wall

Up, up and they pay: $2.6M winning bid for Superman #1 comic

NEW YORK (AP)—A rare copy of a Superman #1 comic book that sold on newsstands for a dime in 1939 was purchased for $2.6 million in an auction.

The comic showing Superman leaping over tall buildings on the cover was sold Thursday night to a buyer who wishes to maintain a secret identity, according to ComicConnect.com, an online auction and consignment company.

The seller, Mark Michaelson, bought the comic in 1979 from its original owner and kept it in a temperature-controlled safe. Michaelson, now semi-retired and living in Houston, paid his way through college by buying and selling comics.

The character created by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster is a pioneer of the superhero genre, and comics featuring the Man of Steel have netted super prices recently. ComicConnect announced in April that a copy of Action Comics #1, the comic that introduced Superman in 1938, sold for $3.25 million.

"Now you look at the comic books and you go 'superheroes everywhere.' You look back in the '30s, there was no such thing. So this was literally the first superhero," said ComicConnect CEO Stephen Fishler.

Fishler said what really makes the copy sold this week notable is that it is very difficult to find high-quality copies of Superman #1.

Sweet repeat: Brothers regift same hard candy for decades

MANCHESTER, N.H. (AP)—Two New Hampshire brothers have gotten their holiday regifting skills down to an art—they've been passing the same hard candy back and forth for over 30 years.

It started in 1987, when Ryan Wasson gave a 10-roll Frankford "Santa's Candy Book" with assorted fruit flavors to his brother, Eric Wasson, as a joke for Christmas, knowing that Eric wouldn't like it.

"I didn't eat them," Eric Wasson told WMUR-TV. "And so the next year I thought, 'Hey, I think I'm going to give it back to him. He'll never remember.'"

OFFBEAT BRIEFS

Holiday gifts taken from luggage, replaced with dog food

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. (AP)—A woman who returned from a flight to Europe with more than $3,000 worth of gifts in her luggage found the contents gone—and replaced with dog food. Gina Sheldon, of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, also found an old T-shirt and a shaving cream bottle in her bag, WMUR-TV reported Friday. "There was a leather jacket I had purchased for my 16-year-old," Sheldon said. I had bought these really cute leather wristlet band purses that I had bought to give to various family and friends." Sheldon said she spent 11 days in Italy and stopped in Paris for a few days for business on her way home recently. Sheldon booked her flight through Delta Air Lines, but it was operated by Air France.

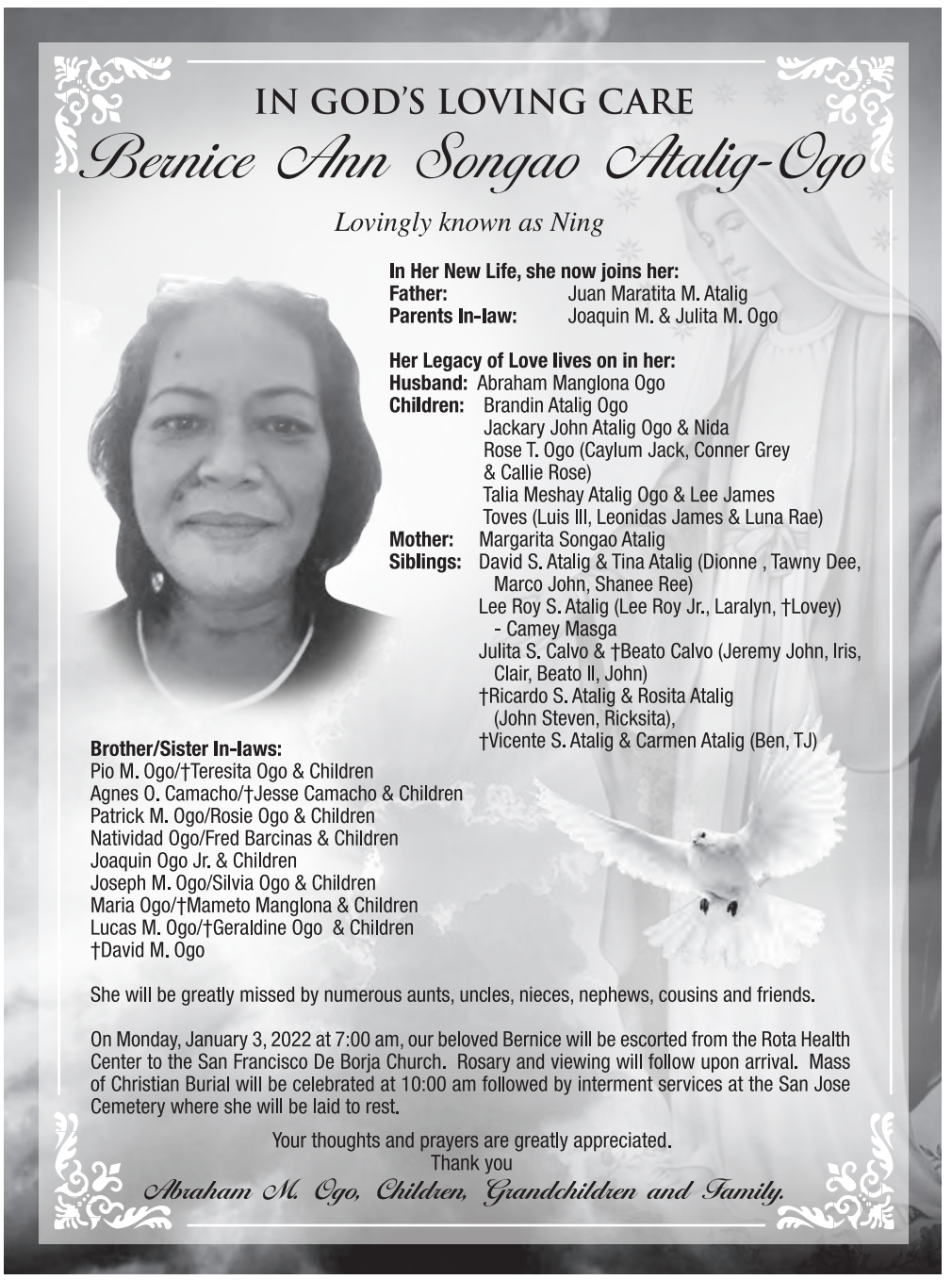
Backfiring car causes active shooter scare at movie theater

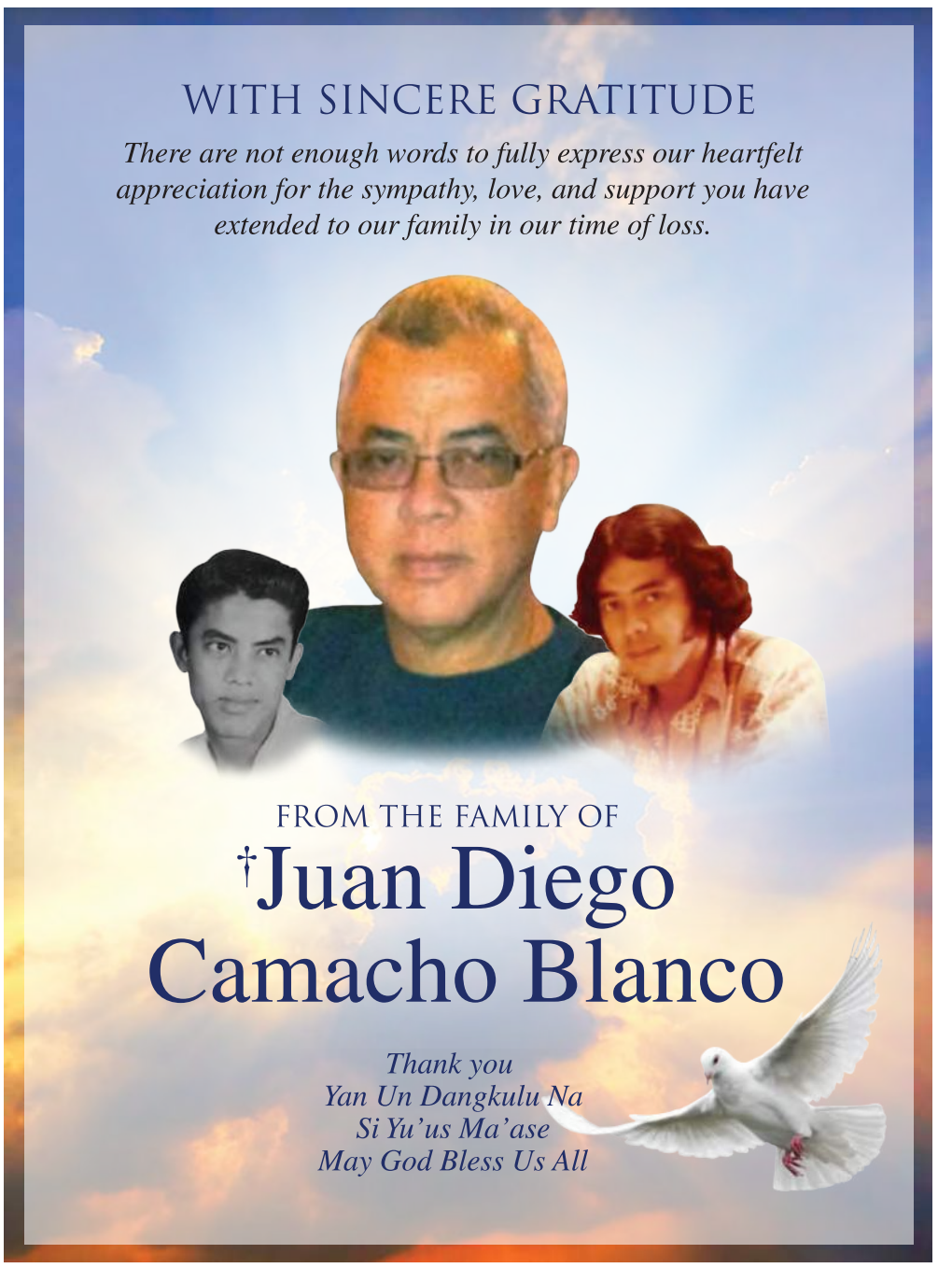
DAVIE, Fla. (AP)—The sound of a car backfiring near a South Florida movie theater led police to evacuate moviegoers following multiple reports of an active shooter, authorties said. The incident happened Sunday night at the Cinemax movie theater in Davie. Davie police later told news outlets that a passing vehicle's engine likely backfired, prompting the scare. "The movie cut out, the alarms went off, the intercoms said, 'Hey, everyone please leave the movie theatres," Jonathan Fernandez told WPLG. "And then I followed everyone out of the movie theaters. Everyone was in a little bit of a panic." Police officers went theater-to-theater inside the complex and found no signs of a shooter, officials said.

Missing the point: Man in Germany drives to driving test

BERLIN (AP)—A man in Germany has discovered the hard way that it's best to get a driving license first before trying to use it. Police in Bergheim, near Cologne, said Tuesday that the 37-year-old drove himself to his driving test, parking an Opel Zafira outside the test center in front of an astonished examiner. They said he told police officers who were called to the scene on Monday that he had only driven because he wanted to make sure to get to the driving test on time. His test was immediately called off. The man now faces an investigation for driving without a license. Police also opened an investigation of the car's owner.







Life & Style

Amanda Gorman writes end-of-year poem, 'New Day's Lyric'



California first lady Maria Shriver and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger smile together, at the Governor's Inaugural Ball at the Sacramento Convention Center, Friday, Jan. 5, 2007, in Sacramento, Calif. AP

NEW YORK (AP)—Amanda Gorman is ending her extraordinary year on a hopeful note.

The 23-year-old poet, whose reading of her own "The Hill We Climb" at President Joe Biden's inauguration made her an international sensation, posted a new work and accompanying video Wednesday on Instagram to mark the end of 2021. "New Day's Lyric" is a five-stanza, 48-line resolution with themes of struggle and healing known to admirers of "The Hill We Climb" and of her bestselling collection "Call Us What We Carry," which came out in early December:

"What was cursed, we will cure.
What was plagued, we will prove pure.
Where we tend to argue, we will try to agree,
Those fortunes we forswore, now the future we foresee,
Where we weren't aware, we're now awake;
Those moments we missed
Are now these moments we make,
The moments we meet,
And our hearts, once all together beaten,
Now all together beat."

Poets rarely enjoy the kind of attention Gorman received in 2021, but in an email to The Associated Press she reflected less on her own success than on the state of the country. Gorman wrote that the "chaos and instability" of the past year had made her reject the idea of going "back to normal" and instead fight to "move beyond it." She mentioned Maya Angelou's poem "Human Family" and added, "To be a family, a country, doesn't necessitate that we be the same or agree on everything, only that we continue to try to see the best in each other and move forward into a shared future. Whether we like it or not, we are in this together."

Gorman offered an alliterative response when asked what inspired "New Day's Lyric," telling the AP that she "wanted to write a lyric to honor the hardships, hurt, hope and healing of 2021 while also harkening the potential of 2022."

"This is such a unique New Year's Day, because even as we toast our glasses to the future, we still have our heads bowed for what has been lost," she wrote. "I think one of the most important things the new year reminds us is of that old adage: This too shall pass. You can't relive the same day twice—meaning every dawn is a new one, and every year an opportunity to step into the light."

In her Instagram post, Gorman urged readers to donate money to the International Rescue Committee (https://www.rescue.org) to help those affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Instagram's parent company, Meta, has pledged $50,000.

Schwarzenegger and Shriver divorce final after 10 years

LOS ANGELES (AP)—Arnold Schwarzenegger and Maria Shriver's marriage is officially over more than 10 years after the award-winning journalist petitioned to end her then-25-year marriage to the action star and former California governor.

A Los Angeles judge finalized the divorce on Tuesday, court records show.

The pair had been married since 1986 when Shriver filed for divorce in 2011 after Schwarzenegger disclosed he had fathered a child with a member of their household staff years earlier.

The revelation set off a tabloid frenzy, but Schwarzenegger and Shriver handled their divorce quietly and without lobbing accusations in court or in public. It's not clear why the process took so long. There were virtually no public actions taken in the case between the initial flurry of filings in 2011 and a resumption of court moves in June.

Financial details of the settlement were kept confidential. Because the couple's four children together are now all adults, there is no child support or custody arrangement.

Settlement papers say that neither owes the other any spousal support, but both reserve the right to seek it through the court in the future.

Messages left with the former couple's lawyers seeking comment were not immediately returned.

Schwarzenegger amassed a fortune playing action roles in the "Terminator" and "Conan" film franchises after a successful career as a bodybuilder. After California suffered economic problems and widespread power outages under the administration of then-Governor Gray Davis, voters recalled the Democratic incumbent and elected Schwarzenegger, a Republican, to the governorship in a free-for-all election in 2003.

Schwarzenegger put his film career aside and served two terms as governor. Within a year of leaving office, he admitted fathering a child, Joseph Baena, who is now 24, with a member of his household staff in the late 1990s. Shriver filed for divorce in July 2011.

Business manager to Kardashians killed, boyfriend charged

LOS ANGELES (AP)—A Los Angeles business manager whose clients had included Nicki Minaj and the Kardashians was killed, and her boyfriend was charged with murder and torture, authorities said Wednesday.

Police found Angela Kukawski, 55, dead in her car in Simi Valley northwest of Los Angeles on Dec. 23, a day after she was reported missing, police said in a statement.

Her 49-year-old boyfriend, Jason Barker, was arrested Tuesday and charged with counts of murder and torture, authorities and public records said.

Kukawski died from sharp and blunt force injuries to the head and neck and strangulation, the Ventura County coroner said.

A criminal complaint from Los Angeles County prosecutors alleges Barker also tortured her with a knife before her death.

Detectives believe Barker killed Kukawski inside their home in the Sherman Oaks section of Los Angeles, put her inside her car, drove it to Simi Valley, parked it and left her inside, authorities said.

Barker was being held in jail on more than $3 million bail. He has not entered a plea or responded to the charges. It is not clear whether he has hired an attorney who could comment.

Kukawski worked for the firm Boulevard Management and handled several high-profile clients during her career, including Minaj, Kim Kardashian, Offset and the estate of Tupac Shakur, according to entertainment trade papers Variety and The Hollywood Reporter.

"We are saddened and heartbroken by the loss of our colleague, Angie Kukawski," Todd Bozick of Boulevard Management said in a statement. "Angie was a kind, wonderful person, and she will be greatly missed by all who knew her."

Dinner-and-drinks invite makes teetotaler uneasy

DEAR ABBY: My husband, "Dan," and I do not consume alcohol, mostly because of our family history. Several years ago while Dan was at a work event, a consultant, "Ken," took him and some coworkers out for dinner. Ken ordered a bottle of wine for the table. Not wanting to cause a scene, my husband drank the glass poured for him. Now Ken has invited Dan and me to join him and his wife for an evening out, and he wants to "meet early for drinks."

Dan is sure Ken will buy another bottle to share. I think Dan should give Ken a heads-up beforehand. Dan thinks it would be rude to refuse a drink and doesn't want to have to go into an explanation as to why we don't. We don't care if the people we are with drink alcohol. Is there a polite way to decline without offending? Should it be ahead of time or at the restaurant?

RESPECTFULLY DECLINE

DEAR RESPECTFULLY: It is perfectly acceptable to refuse alcohol. For various reasons, many people forgo "the grape" (and the harder stuff) these days. If a server asks your husband what beverage he would like, your husband should state his preference—be it sparkling water, a soft drink, a juice drink, etc. There is no shame in it, and it isn't rude. That the host is providing alcohol is not a mandate to indulge, particularly if the guest has a problem with it. If Ken pushes, Dan should simply tell him the two of you generally prefer not to drink alcohol.

■ ■ ■ ■

DEAR ABBY: I am 30 weeks pregnant with my second child. I have always been slender, so like many expecting women, I am somewhat self-conscious of my changing (and ever-growing) figure. I was at the park today with my 2-year-old son when an older woman smiled and asked me when I was due. When I told her, she replied, "Oh, my God. Are you sure there aren't twins in there?" I thought her comment was appalling. Since when is it OK to comment on someone else's body? I was left feeling embarrassed, angry, and on top of that, enormous!

I know I shouldn't care what other people say or think, but pregnancy is also a hormonal time, and I can't seem to get past her nasty comment. What ever happened to "If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all"? A simple "Congratulations," or "How exciting!" would have been a far more appropriate and well-received response.

I'm sending this in the hope that ignorant people who say things like this will read it and realize how hurtful their comments can be to expectant mothers. Also, how should I respond if someone else makes a similar comment?

TEN MORE WEEKS TO GO

DEAR TEN MORE WEEKS: Two responses come immediately to mind. The first would be to tell the person who made the thoughtless comment, "Wow, that was tactless!" Or say, "Nope. It's just one healthy baby in there." Of course, a third option is to say nothing and walk away.

■ ■ ■ ■

DEAR READERS: I'm wishing you a happy, healthy 2022. Whew, folks! I can't believe we made it so quickly through 2021! I will join you tonight toasting a new year that will be a less stressful year for all of us. If you are celebrating this evening, please take measures to protect not only your own health but also the safety of others.

LOVE, ABBY

DEAR ABBY

By ABIGAIL VAN BUREN
FROM UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE



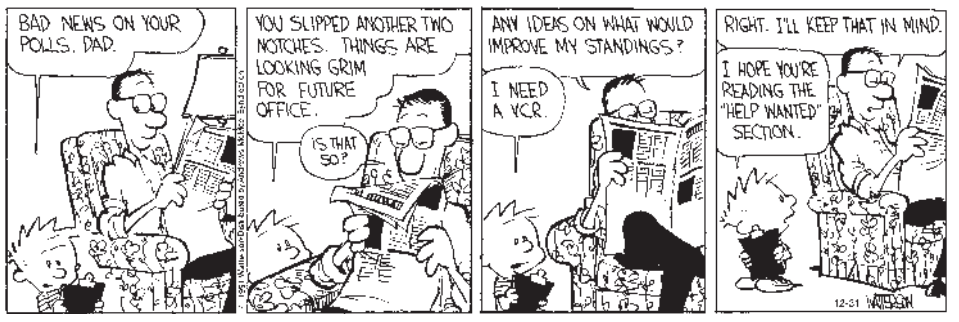
Dear Abby is written by Abigail Van Buren, also known as Jeanne Phillips, and was founded by her mother, Pauline Phillips. Contact Dear Abby at www.DearAbby.com or P.O. Box 69440, Los Angeles, CA 90069.

Abby shares more than 100 of her favorite recipes in two booklets: "Abby's Favorite Recipes" and "More Favorite Recipes by Dear Abby." Send your name and mailing address, plus check or money order for $16 (U.S. funds) to: Dear Abby, Cookbooklet Set, P.O. Box 447, Mount Morris, IL 61054-0447. (Shipping and handling are included in the price.)

Pastimes

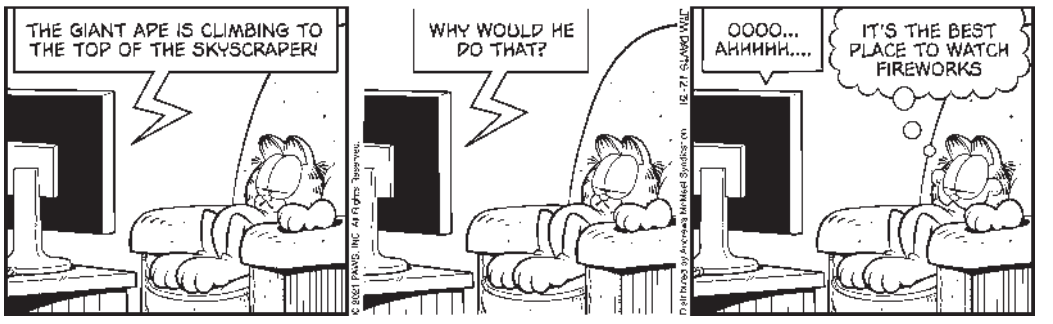
Calvin and Hobbes

By Bill Waterson



Garfield®

By Jim Davis



Adam@home

By Bryan Basset



The Duplex

By Glenn McCoy



CROSSWORD

By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 Sailor's chart
4 Beyond (Pref.)
8 Ballet wear
12 Inventor Whitney
13 Actress Lena
14 Greek vowels
15 Discussion bans
17 Knocks
18 Ripped
19 Theater worker
20 Sand unit
22 Simple
24 Banister
25 Hits the jackpot
29 The Magic, on scoreboards
30 Mattress brand
31 Actress Vardalos
32 Kitchen cooker
34 Despot
35 Initial chip
36 Station
37 Dyeing art
40 Rani's wrap
41 Jug handles
42 Electromagnetic radiation
46 Bangkok cuisine
47 Reed instrument
48 Before
49 "NFL Live" channel
50 Pleads
51 — Moines

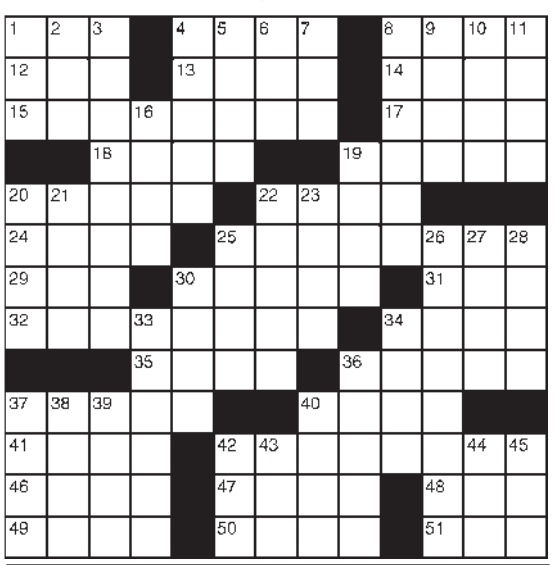
DOWN

1 Jo's sister
2 In the style of
3 Braids
4 Grieve
5 "Legally Blonde" role
6 Cravat
7 Reply (Abbr.)
8 Less wordy
9 Hexagonal state
10 Carton sealer
11 Cold War initials
16 Stir up
19 — Major
20 Pirate's drink
21 — avis
22 Combine
23 Diminutive suffix
25 Bloke
26 Uplifted
27 "Arrivederci!"
28 Male red deer
30 Foundered
33 Dried grape
34 Prefix with byte
36 Titled women
37 — noire
38 Contented sounds
39 Snare
40 Urban haze
42 Sailor
43 Actor Vigoda
44 Verb for you
45 "Certainly!"

Solution time: 25 mins.

B	E	A	R		S	I	S		M	A	N	
E	D	G	E		N	A	N		H	A	L	O
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A	N	N	A		S	O	Y		O	A	S	T

Yesterday's answer 12-31



STUMPED? For answers to today's crossword, call **1-900-226-5955**! 99¢ per minute, touch-tone/rotary phones. (18+ only.) A King Features service, NYC.

CELEBRITIES BORN ON THIS DAY: Joey McIntyre, 49; Val Kilmer, 62; Bebe Neuwirth, 63; Anthony Hopkins, 84.

Happy Birthday: Take the necessary steps to bring about positive change. It's up to you to make things happen, so stop waiting for someone to do the legwork for you. Use your ingenuity to find a unique way to use your skills to get ahead. Control your emotions, stick to the truth and spend only what's necessary to achieve your goal. Your numbers are 8, 13, 23, 27, 31, 35, 41.

ARIES *(March 21-April 19):* Revamp your resume or rethink how best to use your skills. Plan to get involved in groups or organizations that interest you, and you'll discover a way to use your talents, knowledge and skills in an informative and helpful manner. ✪✪✪✪✪

TAURUS *(April 20-May 20):* Investigate possibilities that have the potential to lead you in a direction that raises your enthusiasm. Do the legwork, and you'll discover a way to turn something you enjoy doing into a lucrative pastime. ✪✪✪

GEMINI *(May 21-June 20):* Handle partnerships with caution. Leave nothing to chance, and don't give others access to your personal and financial matters. Head into the new year with a plan, but don't share until you are ready to turn your dream into a reality. ✪✪✪

CANCER *(June 21-July 22):* Discuss lifestyle changes, and put a plan together that encourages you to spend time with loved ones. You'll discover you have more support than you realize. Creative input will give insight into how to manage your money and enjoy life. ✪✪✪

LEO *(July 23-Aug. 22):* Limit indulgence. Start the year off right. You'll find it engaging to spend time with someone unique, making plans for the upcoming year and reminiscing about the days gone by. ✪✪✪✪✪

VIRGO *(Aug. 23-Sept. 22):* Put a plan in place. Get out with friends who offer a different perspective on life. Don't let anyone cause emotional mayhem. Embrace the move from one year to the next with optimism and courage to do what's best for you. ✪✪

LIBRA *(Sept. 23-Oct. 22):* You can't please everyone. Focus on mapping out a plan that will help you achieve your goal. It's not the time to be lazy or to let others make decisions for you. Be responsible. ✪✪✪✪

SCORPIO *(Oct. 23-Nov. 21):* Close one door and open another. It's time to let go of the past and walk toward the sunshine. Life is what you make it, and taking charge and following your heart will lead to new beginnings. Embrace your dreams. ✪✪✪

SAGITTARIUS *(Nov. 22-Dec. 21):* You'll get upset if you indulge or spend time with people who don't see things your way. Restrictions will help you eliminate making a mistake you regret. Don't make promises you cannot keep. Curb your appetite for lavishness. ✪✪✪

EUGENIA LAST

THE LAST WORD IN ASTROLOGY

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CAPRICORN *(Dec. 22-Jan. 19):* Start backing yourself instead of someone else, and you'll figure out the best way to move forward. Spend time with someone who can help you recognize what you have to offer. Explore the possibilities, and strategize how best to move forward. ✪✪✪

AQUARIUS *(Jan. 20-Feb. 18):* Make up your mind. Refuse to let what others do stop you from following through with your plans. Be passionate about life and the things you love to do. Set doable goals, and you'll feel good heading into the upcoming year. ✪✪✪

PISCES *(Feb. 19-March 20):* Keep life simple. Don't exaggerate or let indulgence get the best of you. Pace yourself, and close this year on a high note. Surround yourself with people who share your thoughts, goals and beliefs, and together you will make progress. ✪✪

Birthday Baby: You are intuitive, unique and flexible. You are colorful and creative.

✪: Avoid conflicts; work behind the scenes. ✪✪: You can accomplish, but don't rely on others. ✪✪✪: Focus and you'll reach your goals. ✪✪✪✪: Aim high; start new projects. ✪✪✪✪✪: Nothing can stop you; go for gold.

SUDOKU

Conceptis Sudoku *By Dave Green*

				5				
4		7	1		2			
8						2	4	
							6	7
	2			1			9	
6	7							
	5	4						2
			7		8	1		9
				9				

Difficulty Level ★★★★ 12/31

Sudoku is a number-placing puzzle based on a 9x9 grid with several given numbers. The object is to place the numbers 1 to 9 in the empty squares so that each row, each column and each 3x3 box contains the same number only once. The difficulty level of the Conceptis Sudoku increases from Monday to Saturday.

Yesterday's Answer

7	1	4	8	5	2	9	3	6
3	8	9	6	1	4	5	2	7
5	2	6	3	9	7	4	1	8
8	9	3	5	7	6	1	4	2
1	6	5	2	4	8	3	7	9
4	7	2	1	3	9	6	8	5
9	4	1	7	2	5	8	6	3
2	3	8	9	6	1	7	5	4
6	5	7	4	8	3	2	9	1

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WONDERWORD®

By DAVID OUELLET

HOW TO PLAY: All the words listed below appear in the puzzle — horizontally, vertically, diagonally and even backward. Find them, circle each letter of the word and strike it off the list. The leftover letters spell the WONDERWORD.

DO YOU HAVE PLANS ON NEW YEAR'S EVE? Solution: 9 letters

D	G	Y	Y	P	P	Ⓐ	H	T	S	A	E	F	D	Y
S	A	N	L	C	H	Ⓛ	I	R	E	T	N	I	W	Z
X	P	N	I	I	C	Ⓐ	K	E	A	D	N	S	E	O
R	A	A	C	D	M	Ⓖ	E	R	S	N	Y	C	T	C
E	R	L	R	E	D	A	B	T	E	A	R	A	A	I
H	T	E	E	K	R	E	F	R	L	B	A	N	K	S
T	Y	G	S	R	L	A	W	P	A	A	U	D	S	U
E	C	O	A	E	R	E	U	R	M	K	N	Y	K	M
G	H	A	C	C	L	Z	S	Q	P	E	A	R	R	I
O	E	G	L	C	Z	K	P	D	S	A	J	O	O	D
T	E	N	G	L	M	T	N	A	N	S	N	M	W	N
T	R	E	E	O	S	E	S	I	R	E	E	E	E	I
E	S	J	V	C	A	F	E	A	R	A	I	M	R	G
G	N	I	S	K	B	I	N	G	O	P	D	R	I	H
Y	E	A	R	E	U	N	E	V	I	T	S	E	F	T

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Bake, Band, Bars, Bingo, Café, Cake, Calls, Candy, Celebrate, Cheers, Clock, Cozy, Crafts, Dance, Dinner, Family, Feast, Festive, Fireworks, Friends, Gala, Get Together, Happy, Hike, January, Jenga, Lego, Memory, Midnight, Movie, Music, Parade, Party, Plays, Puzzle, Relax, Sing, Skate, Sparkles, Sprinkles, Times Square, Toast, Venue, Wedding, Winter, Year

Yesterday's Answer: Fancy

Jo's Jewels Collector's Edition is back by popular demand! Purchase online at www.WonderWordBooks.com or call 1-800-642-6480.

Ja Morant scores 41 points, Grizzlies beat slumping Lakers

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP)—Ja Morant scored 41 points, Desmond Bane added 20 and the Memphis Grizzlies overcame a 14-point second-half deficit to beat the Los Angeles Lakers 104-99 on Wednesday night.

LeBron James led Los Angeles with 37 points — a day short of his 37th birthday — and 13 rebounds and a season-high eight 3-pointers. Russell Westbrook added a triple-double with 16 points, 10 rebounds and 12 assists.

The Grizzlies improved to 22-14 with their third straight victory, while the Lakers fell to 17-19 with their sixth loss in seven games.

Morant, making a strong bid for the All-Star Game, scored 25 of his points in the second half, including 14 in the third quarter. He scored 11 of the Grizzlies' final 15 points.

"What an unbelievable night by Ja," Memphis coach Taylor Jenkins said. "When he got going it kind of fueled everyone else. We've said it from Day 1, he's built for moments like this."

Jenkins also was impressed with Morant's defense (two steals, two blocks) and rebounding. He had 10 rebounds.

"I was taking what the defense gave me and it turned out good for us," Morant said. "That's normally how I attack every game. Tonight was just my night."

Memphis trailed in the second half until Tyus Jones hit in a floater for a 93-92 lead with 6:50 left. Morant followed with consecutive 3-pointers for a 99-92 advantage with 4:28 to go. Bane sealed the win with two free throws with 5.1 seconds to go

Ahead by six at the half, the Lakers pushed their advantage to 14 at 80-66 during a third quarter in which Los Angeles made six 3-pointers. James had three of those.



Memphis Grizzlies guard Desmond Bane (22) defends against Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James (6) during the first half of an NBA basketball game Wednesday, Dec. 29, 2021, in Memphis, Tenn. AP

Suns 115, Thunder 97

In Thunder, Devin Booker scored 38 points, surpassing 10,000 for his career, and the Phoenix Suns beat Oklahoma City to end a two-game losing streak and tie for the NBA lead.

The Suns rebounded from home losses to Golden State and Memphis to pull even with the Warriors atop the league standings at 27-7.

Booker made 12 of 24 shots from the floor, going 6 of 12 from 3-point range.

JaVale McGee and Cameron Payne each scored 16 points, with McGee adding eight rebounds and Payne a team-high seven assists. Cam Johnson finished with 12 points, and Jalen Smith had 11 points and a career-high 14 rebounds.

Ty Jerome scored a career-high 24 points for the Thunder.

Both teams were without several key players and their head coaches.

Clippers 91, Celtics 82

In Boston, Eric Bledsoe scored 10 of his 17 points in the fourth quarter, hitting a key 3-pointer down the stretch, to help los Angeles beat Boston.

Marcus Morris had 23 points and 10 rebounds, and Terance Mann and Luke Kennard also scored 17 apiece for the Clippers. Los Angeles ended a two-game skid and completed a season sweep of the Celtics on a night both clubs were short-handed.

Jaylen Brown led Boston with 30 points. Robert Williams had 16 points and 14 rebounds, and Al Horford added nine points with 10 rebounds.

The Clippers were without star forward Paul George for a third straight game with a torn ligament in his right elbow that could keep him out up to a month. But Los Angeles, which had lost five of six, led most of the game.

Boston was missing scoring leader Jayson Tatum, who was placed on the COVID-19 health and safety protocols list on Monday, and starting guard Marcus Smart, who was out with a hand injury.

Knicks 94, Pistons 85

In Detroit, Alec Burks scored a season-high 34 points to lead a huge night from New York's bench and the Knicks beat short-handed Detroit.

Immanuel Quickley added 18 points as the Knicks' reserves combined for 65 points. RJ Barrett was the only starter in double figures at 15 points. New York outscored Detroit 30-14 in the fourth quarter.

Saddiq Bey had a career-high 32 points for Detroit, and Hamidou Diallo had a season-high 31 points with 13 rebounds. The NBA-worst Pistons have lost four in a row and 18 of 19.

Bulls 131, Hawks 117

In Chicago, Zach LaVine scored 25 points and Chicago beat Atlanta for the second time in three nights.

The Bulls extended their winning streak to a season-high five games. The Hawks, who are playing without 15 players due to the NBA's health and safety protocols and injuries, lost for the fifth time in six games.

Trey Young scored 26 points, and Clint Capela added 18 for the Hawks in the opener of a six-game trip.

The Bulls shot 61.9% and had a season-high with 38 assists. They beat the Hawks 130-118 on Monday night in Atlanta.

Hornets 116, Pacers 108

In Indianapolis, Terry Rozier scored a season-high 35 points, LaMelo Ball added 21 points and 12 rebounds and Charlotte beat Indiana.

Ball also had nine assists, falling just short of his third triple-double this season and the fourth of his career. The Hornets won their third straight overall and fifth in a row in the series, including all three matchups this season.

Caris LeVert scored 27 points for Indiana.

Jazz 120, Trail Blazers 105

In Portland, Ore., Rudy Gobert had 22 points and 14 rebounds, and the Utah Jazz beat the Portland Trail Blazers 120-105 on Wednesday night with star Donovan Mitchell out with a sore back.

Portland's Damian Lillard and Norman Powell each scored 32 points. The Trail Blazers were missing seven players in the NBA's COVID-19 health and safety protocols for the second straight game.

Utah's dominance started on the inside and continued all night long, outscoring Portland 74-30 in the paint.

Utah's Hassan Whiteside had 15 points and 11 rebounds off the bench, while reserve forward Rudy Gay pitched in 21 points.

Powell was key to keeping the Blazers close, scoring 25 of his 32 points in the first half. Powell's 25 points marked the highest-scoring half by a Blazer this season, but the outside shooting wasn't enough to overcome Utah's success around the basket.

Kings 95, Mavericks 94

In Sacramento, Sacramento Kings were victorious for the second time in as many nights, defeating the Dallas Mavericks 95-94 at home on Wednesday at Golden 1 Center. Chimezie Metu hit the game-winning three-pointer at the buzzer to give the Kings the victory.

De'Aaron Fox had a team-high 16 points and was one of six players to score in double figures as Sacramento improved to 15-21. Dallas fell to 16-18 after its third loss in its last four games. Jalen Brunson had 25 points and Kristaps Porzingis added 24 to lead the Mavericks.

The Mavericks were playing without star point guard Luka Doncic, who is one of seven players on the team in the NBA's health and safety protocols.

NBA postpones Heat-Spurs, after Miami has COVID outbreak

MIAMI (AP)—The NBA postponed Wednesday's game between Miami and San Antonio after a combination of injuries and positive COVID-19 tests left the Heat unable to meet the league's requirement of eight available players.

It was the 10th game postponed in the NBA this season because of virus-related issues. None has been rescheduled at this point.

Miami had 12 players listed as out for the game against the Spurs for a variety of reasons. The Heat beat Washington on Tuesday night with eight players available—and of those, only five would have been able to play Wednesday in San Antonio.

Gabe Vincent, who played 35 minutes in Tuesday's win, learned after the game that he had a positive test and couldn't travel. Jimmy Butler was ruled out for Wednesday after spraining his right ankle with about a minute left in the Wizards' game and KZ Okpala was unable to play because of an injury he sustained Tuesday as well.

The Heat also added P.J. Tucker and and Zylan Cheatham, neither of whom played Tuesday, to the health and safety protocols. And Tuesday's game came after Miami guard Max Strus—who had been feeling no symptoms—was pulled after he warmed up, because of a positive test that required him to enter the protocols.

"That's the perplexing thing about this right now, this variant," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "I think we've gotten to a point—I've said it before—we need more information. Are there more asymptomatic cases? All of this is with the caveat of double vaccination, with a booster and then asymptomatic, what does that mean and what adjustments can we make there? ... I think it leads to a lot of confusion."

Miami had tried to get roster help Wednesday—ironically—from the Austin Spurs, San Antonio's G League affiliate, in part because those players could get to San Antonio relatively quickly and in time to play Wednesday. Miami was in the process of signing Austin center Aric Holman to a hardship contract Wednesday, and it likely will need more reinforcements before its next scheduled game Friday in Houston.

Almost every team in the NBA has been dealing with a virus-related issue in recent days, with 119 players known to be in the protocols by Wednesday evening. That figure, which changes often as players test in and out, does not include coaches, staff and others in the protocols—including referees. The NBA said Wednesday night that referee Justin Van Duyne had entered protocols, leaving the league with a two-man crew to work the game between Phoenix and Oklahoma City.

The league told teams early Wednesday that it was amending its protocols again, this time to shorten the amount of time a player who tests positive needs to spend in isolation to five days—following guidance released by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The league made that disclosure in a memo obtained by The Associated Press.

The five-day isolation is predicated on the player either being asymptomatic or having his symptoms gone by the fifth day. That change doesn't necessarily mean a player could return to the court more quickly, since the updated CDC guidelines also call for an additional five days of wearing a mask when around others after leaving isolation.

But it does allow teams, when a player or staffer tests positive on a road trip and must begin isolating immediately, the ability to use commercial airlines to fly that person home sooner than has been the case in some instances while the 10-day isolation period was in effect.

Another policy tweak is coming for those attending Golden State Warriors games after Feb. 1, requiring most fans to have received a booster shot.

Complying with a revised mandate issued Wednesday in San Francisco, the Warriors said they'll be verifying "proof of up-to-date vaccinations, which includes proof of a booster shot at least one week prior to an event for eligible guests" before allowing those guests into the arena. Until then, the only mandate for those games remains a guest be fully vaccinated.

And in the next step toward his season debut, Brooklyn Nets guard Kyrie Irving—who has not played this season because of his decision to not get vaccinated but cleared the NBA's protocols earlier this week—returned to practice Wednesday.

"I know everybody's feeling it," Irving said. "Just praying for everybody to be healthy during these times."

NFL teams taking extra precautions beyond COVID-19 protocols

By ROB MAADDI
AP PRO FOOTBALL WRITER

NFL coaches are taking precautions beyond the league's COVID-19 protocols to help ensure players are available for games.

Several teams are separating quarterbacks, holding virtual meetings and doing whatever it takes to avoid breakouts of the virus. Green Bay, Washington, Baltimore, Cleveland, Chicago and New Orleans have played without starting quarterbacks due to COVID-19. Other key players have also missed important games in recent weeks.

The league and the NFL Players Association revised protocols on Tuesday, reducing isolation time for players who test positive for COVID-19 and are asymptomatic, including unvaccinated players, to five days from 10.

The league also has implemented restrictions on players eating together, limited number of occupants in the weight room to 15, and is requiring masks be worn by all players and staff indoors at team facilities.

As teams fight for playoff berths and positioning, the virus forces them to tackle another opponent.

The San Francisco 49ers (8-7) were among the teams who chose to meet virtually Wednesday.

"Our team, we all don't prefer Zoom," Niners coach Kyle Shanahan said. "People know what's at stake with the chances of us losing guys for these games, so it wasn't a hard issue at all going Zoom."

The Philadelphia Eagles (8-7) had quarterbacks and specialists meet virtually but other position groups met in person.



Minnesota Vikings running back Dalvin Cook carries the ball during the first half of an NFL football game against the Chicago Bears Monday, Dec. 20, 2021, in Chicago. AP

"There is going to be some things we do, as far as getting young guys ready to play, that is a little unique and different," Eagles coach Nick Sirianni said. "I'm not going to share that here right now for competitive advantages, but we're doing some things to make sure if a guy gets sprung into action late, that he's going to be ready to go even more so than what he would have in the past."

The league is encouraging even fully vaccinated staff and players to avoid public areas including restaurants, bars and social gatherings. It's not a mandate but it's another extra step some team leaders will emphasize.

"I definitely think there's a point where as a leader you want to try and keep things together as much as you can," Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts said. "You understand you have a group full of grown men who make grown-men decisions, but I definitely encourage everybody to stay safe, be responsible and take precautions in this thing. You can live with it and be OK if you knew you took precaution and did everything you could."

The Minnesota Vikings (7-8) got back running back Dalvin Cook from the COVID-19 list on Wednesday after he missed a loss to the Rams.

"We're staying six feet apart, in larger meeting rooms and keeping our masks on," said Cook, who is unvaccinated. "Staying away from each other, basically. Got to talk from a distance nowadays. Stuff like that. Doing the right stuff so our team is in the right position come these next two weeks."

Green Bay's Aaron Rodgers is in the 90-day testing holiday, but the Packers (12-3) currently have 15 players on the reserve/COVID-19 list, including two practice squad guys. The most notable are punter Corey Bojorquez, tight end Marcedes Lewis and cornerback Kevin King.

"We're pretty fortunate that we have a facility that can accommodate us just in terms of the space of making sure that everybody's spread out," coach Matt LaFleur said. "I think our guys are doing a good job of wearing their masks. ... We will do more virtual meetings post-practice, potentially. We've really kind of left it up to the position room in terms of how they'd like to do it."

Tampa Bay Buccaneers coach Bruce Arians turned the team over to assistant Harold Goodwin after he tested positive on Tuesday. The Buccaneers (11-4) placed cornerbacks Jamel Dean and Sean Murphy-Bunting on the COVID-19 list on Tuesday.

"I had to remind guys to spread out, just get away from each other, just because it's a dangerous time right now, not only for us as players but for the nation, for the world for that part," Goodwin said. "We've just got to be smart about it. It's here. We all know it's here and we just have to be aware of what we're doing, shaking hands, washing our hands, all those kinds of things. Just be smart."

The Denver Broncos, who started a wide receiver at quarterback last season due to COVID-19, are isolating practice squad QB Anthony Gordon, and are holding virtual meetings.

The Buffalo Bills (9-6) have been holding virtual meetings for a couple weeks, and coach Sean McDermott has held most practices outdoors, where players are considered less susceptible to transmit the virus.

"We've taken about as many precautions as you can take," McDermott said.

The Tennessee Titans (10-5) protected practice squad QB Kevin Hogan but aren't quarantining other quarterbacks. They have 11 total players on the COVID-19 list.

"We've got ample space now," coach Mike Vrabel said. "I mean, we've got the bubble. That's a great set in there. We have a massive team meeting room that you have just a few people in. And so we're very conscious of making sure that everybody is more than adequately spaced out."

While the league and the players' union have worked together to update protocols to ensure the season is played uninterrupted, teams know taking extra measures is helpful even though it's not optimal.

"I think just with COVID and everything you've got to do what you've got to do as far as protocols go," Niners quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo said. "But I think just as a football team, we enjoy being around each other. We enjoy being in the locker room, talking to each other, messing around, all that good stuff, and it's just hard to do it on Zoom. That slight delay really makes things a little awkward."

Saleh rejoins Jets after clearing COVID-19 protocols

By DENNIS WASZAK Jr.
AP PRO FOOTBALL WRITER

NEW YORK (AP)—New York Jets coach Robert Saleh cleared COVID-19 protocols and returned to the facility Wednesday to run practice for the first time since testing positive for the coronavirus last week.

Saleh sat out the team's 26-21 victory over Jacksonville last Sunday, forced to watch from a hotel room while tight ends coach Ron Middleton assumed the head coaching duties.

Saleh tested positive last Wednesday after feeling symptoms, but still participated in remote team meetings. He was cleared Tuesday night and thrilled to be back Wednesday at the team's facility in Florham Park, New Jersey.

"It's like the first day of school," Saleh said with a laugh. "I'm ready to go another 18 weeks."

The Jets had as many as 25 players—on the active and practice squad rosters, and injured reserve—on the COVID-19 list as of Tuesday, and got back nine after they also cleared COVID-19 protocols. The NFL reduced the isolation time for players who test positive for COVID-19 and are asymptomatic, including unvaccinated players, to five days from 10.

The decision made Tuesday by the league and the NFL Players Association came after the CDC changed its guidelines for those who are asymptomatic, recommending a five-day isolation period and masking over the second five days.

The team announced backup quarterback Joe Flacco, tight end Kenny Yeboah, defensive linemen Folorunso Fatukasi, Jonathan Marshall and Tanzel Smart, linebackers Hamsah Nasirildeen and Noah Dawkins, and cornerbacks Michael Carter II and Lamar Jackson were expected to practice Wednesday. Smart, Dawkins and Jackson were restored to the practice squad.

Saleh added the Jets are hopeful wide receiver Vyncint Smith, guards Alijah Vera-Tucker and Laurent Duvernay-Tardif, defensive linemen John Franklin-Myers and Hamilcar Rashed Jr., and safety Ashtyn Davis will clear COVID-19 protocols later in the week and be able to play against Tampa Bay on Sunday.

The Minnesota Vikings returned running back Dalvin Cook from the COVID-19 list ahead of their crucial game at Green Bay, but wide receiver Adam Thielen will be out after being placed on injured reserve.

Cook was sidelined for Minnesota's loss to the Rams last week. He was able to take advantage of the NFL's new shortened isolation rule, forcing asymptomatic players to sit out only five days, half of the previous requirement. Cook is unvaccinated and declined to discuss that subject when asked Wednesday before practice.

Thielen sprained his left ankle on the opening drive at Detroit on Dec. 5. He returned against the Rams after missing two games, but aggravated the injury twice and barely played in the second half. Thielen must sit out a minimum of three games, meaning the Vikings would have to make the playoffs and win a first-round matchup for him to have an opportunity to play again this season. The 31-year-old Thielen had 726 yards and 10 touchdowns in 2021.

The Vikings (7-8) play the Packers (12-3) on Sunday night. They're in eighth place in the NFC, one game behind San Francisco and Philadelphia. The 49ers and Eagles currently hold the final two wild-card spots.

The Chiefs no longer have any players on the COVID-19 list after activating tight end Travis Kelce, linebacker Nick Bolton, right tackle Lucas Niang, cornerback Rashad Fenton, kicker Harrison Butker and punter Tommy Townsend in time to return to practice Wednesday.

At one point last week, the Chiefs had an outbreak that landed 16 players on the reserve list. A few returned in time for their 36-10 throttling of the Steelers on Sunday, and the rest should be available this Sunday in Cincinnati.

Kansas City has clinched the AFC West and will be trying to maintain its grasp on the No. 1 seed and first-round playoff bye. The Bengals will be trying to clinch the AFC North with a win over the Chiefs.

New Orleans got 11 players off the COVID-19 list, including quarterbacks Taysom Hill and Trevor Siemian, linebackers Kwon Alexander, Demario Davis, Kaden Elliss, tight end Adam Trautman, offensive linemen James Carpenter and Jordan Mills, defensive tackle Christian Ringo and defensive backs J.T. Gray and Jeff Heath.

The Texans activated 13 players from the list, including wide receiver Brandin Cooks, who leads the team with 945 yards receiving; center Justin Britt; K Ka'imi Fairbairn; LB Kamu Grugier-Hill, who leads the team with 94 tackles; and defensive end Jonathan Greenard, who has a team-leading eight sacks.

Houston added running back David Johnson to the COVID list Monday and placed wide receiver Chris Moore and defensive lineman Ron'Dell Carter on the list Wednesday. Kicker Dominik Eberle, who was signed last week to fill in for Fairbairn against the Chargers, was placed on the practice squad/COVID list Wednesday.

2021 IN REVIEW

NMA named World Athletics Awards 2021 finalist



All participants of Northern Marianas Athletics' 2021 Christmas Island Relay pose for a group photo after the 13.7-mile race from the Pacific Islands Club Saipan in San Antonio to the Last Command Post in Marpi. MARK RABAGO

7 For carefully navigating its way through the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, Northern Marianas Athletics was named one of the Oceania Area Finalists for the World Athletics Awards 2021.

This year saw the CNMI athletics federation host different events and competitions that brought athletics literally back on track after facing setbacks in 2020 due to the worldwide health crisis.

NMA joined the Cook Islands and Australia on the shortlist of finalists with the latter eventually getting OAA's nod and the nomination for the World Athletics Awards 2021, which was held virtually last Dec. 1. The Costa Rican Athletics Federation ended up winning the World Athletics Member Federation of the Year Competition, beating Australia, Kenya, Czech Republic, Ecuador, and Japan.

NMA nonetheless acknowledged its partners and stakeholders as key components in the continued implementation of its programs amid the challenging times brought by COVID-19.

"We are honored with this recognition, which we would like to share to our partners in developing the sport of athletics in the NMI. We certainly can't do it without our partners from the community. All of us are volunteers in this program and our partners make it's easier for us to achieve successes across our community and our regions. The phrase, 'teamwork makes the dream work' comes to mind with this honor from OAA," NMA president Ray Tebuteb said.

Coby slam-dunks his way to history

8 Channeling his inner Kobe Bryant, Coby Santos made history by winning the slam dunk competition of the Marianas Islands Basketball League 3×3 Season 2 tournament last June 27 at the Marianas High School Gymnasium.

The 20-year-old Northern Marianas College student turned on his Mamba Mentality and even sported the late Lakers great's jersey to beat Erik Joe in the finals, 58-47.

Instead of the regulation 10-foot rim, organizers lowered it to 9 1/2 feet to give competitors a better chance of completing their slam dunks.

In his first dunk in the finals, Santos bounced the ball high before making a 360 turn and slamming it home for a perfect 30 points from judges Clint Albert, Keith Nabors, and David John Apatang. He made an easier but still impressive slam in his second dunk in the finals that netted him 28 points.



In the eliminations, Santos wowed the crowd with his high-flying antics and finished with 56 points in his two dunks (27 and 29).

Santos, who said he first dunked when he was 18 years old in 2019, said he practiced for a day for the competition and tried to perfect three slam dunks.

"One-hundred percent I always give my 100%," when asked how much he exerted in the slam dunk contest.

Mix Breed's Cody Santos wows the crowd with one of his high-flying dunks in the slam dunk competition of the Marianas Mariana Islands Basketball League 3×3 Season 2 tournament at the Marianas High School Gymnasium last June 27. MARK RABAGO

NMSA not giving up on Olympic dream

9 Northern Marianas Sports Association president Jerry Tan said he will not give up on the CNMI's quest to have its athletes take part in the Olympics.

"I don't have anything definite that I can say at this time, but as far as NMSA is concerned it's our ultimate goal and dream to see our athletes to be able to participate in the Olympics just like many of our Oceania brothers and sisters," he said when officials from the Oceania National Olympic Committees visited Saipan last September.



Tan

Tan said the CNMI is actually not alone in its quest for Olympic membership. In Oceania alone six other island-nations have knocked on the door of the International Olympic Committee—New Caledonia, Niue, Norfolk Island, Tahiti, Tokelau, and Wallis and Futuna.

"We are one of the seven associate members. So we are not the only member within the Oceania family that is not an Olympic member. Maybe everyone has a unique case. We are examining what happened in the late '80s because we did submit an application to IOC and for whatever reason I'm still trying to understand why we were not granted [membership]."

Tan admitted that being granted membership in the IOC will be a difficult and complicated journey, especially since he himself is new at the helm of NMSA.

He, however, assured that he will try his best to move forward the CNMI's application to the OIC.

"This is important enough for our athletes that at least we owe it to them that we do as much as we can. Not to say that we didn't try," he said.



Local sports were cancelled in the early and latter parts of the year from an abundance of precaution because of the COVID-19 scare. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Micro Games, Pacific Games postponements

10 Probably it was for the best that the 2022 Micronesian Games in the Marshall Islands and the 2023 Pacific Games in the Solomon Islands were postponed to later dates.

With the CNMI and the rest of the island-nations of the Pacific grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic and making their own preparations for the 2021 Pacific Mini Games in the Northern Marianas, delaying the two other quadrennial events seemed like a breath of fresh air.

"We finally received a letter from the Micronesian Games Council and also from the Marshall Islands Games Organizing Committee regarding the postponement and that was expected. So, it's official but they didn't say exactly when in 2023 they will move it," said Northern Marianas Sports Association president Jerry Tan during a membership meeting last November.

The postponement of the Micronesian Games, Tan said, was a big blow for sports not included in the Pacific Games as they were looking forward to jumpstart their programs by taking part in the Majuro Games.

"I fully understand the Marshall Islands has their challenges with regards to the Games, but it bothered me because I was thinking about the different sports preparing for the Micronesian Games, especially those not part of the Mini Games," he said.

The Pacific Games in Honiara, Solomon Islands were earlier postponed from July 2023 to November 2023 as organizers needed more time to prepare for the event.

Officials in Honiara expressed concerns that if the event was held as planned in July, there would not be enough time to run test events and have venues fully operational.

Financial concerns are also said to be linked in the delay of the next edition of the quadrennial games.

The Solomon Islands 2023 Pacific Games are now scheduled to take place from Nov. 19 to Dec. 2, 2023.

The postponements of the Micro Games and Pacific Games comes on top of postponements of local sports earlier and in the latter parts of the year from an abundance of precaution because of the COVID-19 scare.



The CNMI's Colin Sinclair in action against Marco Brugnerotto of Italy in the championship game of the M15 Guatamala Open last Nov. 28 in Guatamala City, Guatamala. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Colin notches 2nd ITF tour title

Colin Sinclair topped the Guatamala Open after outlasting Marco Brugnerotto of Italy in the final, 6-1, 5-7, 6-4.

By winning the M15 tournament held from Nov. 22 to 28 in Guatamala City, the 26-year-old annexed his second championship in the International Tennis Federation Men's World Tennis Tour.

"I'm really happy with how the week went. Since getting promoted at Davis Cup I've felt like I've been playing good tennis but hadn't gotten any results. I was able to beat Taha Baadi in the semis who had beaten me a couple weeks before and then I beat Marco [Brugnerotto] in the final in a really close third set. It was my first title in almost three years and I hope that I can keep this momentum for our Davis Cup World Group II tie in March," said Sinclair.

It may be recalled that Sinclair helped Pacific Oceania to promotion to Group II of the Davis Cup in 2022 after beating Syria in the finals of Group III last September in Amman, Jordan.

Sinclair first clinched an ITF men's tour singles championship in 2019 when he won the Claremont Club Pro Classic in California.

CNMI national tennis coach Jeff Race also recently named Sinclair to the CNMI National Tennis Team for next year's Northern Marianas Pacific Mini Games.

He is one of four automatic slots in the team. The others are fellow 2019 Apia, Samoa Pacific Mini Games men's team medalist Robbie Schorr, fellow mixed doubles gold medalist Carol Lee, and Isabel Herras. Incidentally, Sinclair also won the men's singles gold in the quadrennial event.

CNMI swimmers take part in World Championships

Jinnosuke Suzuki, Juhn Tenorio, and sisters Asaka and Shoko Litulumar performed beyond expectations in the 15th FINA World Swimming Championships held from Dec. 16 to 21 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

CNMI national swimming coach Hiroyuki Kimura said more than the impressive swim times, the biggest achievement of the Fab Four inside the cavernous Etihad Arena was they were able to achieve the feat training in small home pools, dive shops, and in the open water and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Since 2018, the official swimming pool disappeared from this island. Then in addition, we could not do anything since the onset of COVID-19. There was no swim meet, no chance to go to off-island training or any off-island meets. However, we never gave up our dreams," he said.

The Tsunami Saipan Swimming Center coach said they hunkered down to work and made use of what was available to them and kept their spirits up even during the nearly two years COVID-19 hindered not only their training but also opportunities to train or compete abroad.



From left standing, Jinnosuke Suzuki, CNMI national swimming coach Hiroyuki Kimura, Asaka Litulumar, and Northern Marianas Swimming Federation representatives Hiroko Tenorio and Richard Sikkel. From left squatting, Shoko Litulumar and Juhn Tenorio. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Northern Marianas Swimming Federation representative Richard Sikkel, meanwhile, said Suzuki, Tenorio, and the Litulumar sisters really gave a good account of themselves during the swimming championships and he couldn't be more proud of their performance.

"All four swimmers impressed with the way they handled performing on the biggest swimming stage of the world. They conducted themselves professionally and did what they came to Abu Dhabi to do, which was to swim their best times," he said.

Aside from Suzuki, Tenorio, the Litulumar sisters, Kimura, and Sikkel also part of the CNMI delegation in Abu Dhabi was NMSF representative Hiroko Tenorio.


Flores


Costales


Bachani


Goto


McCallion


Podziewski

Athletic scholarship for soccer players

CNMI soccer players continue to gain athletic scholarship opportunities despite the COVID-19 pandemic slowing down on-field activities in 2021.

NMI Boys U18 National Team members Dev Bachani and Kohtaro Gato are both heading to Park University after graduating from high school.

Known as the Buccaneers, Park University of Gilbert, Arizona plays in the California Pacific Conference of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics.

Ditto for Katrina Costales, Stephanie Flores, Lilian Podziewski, and Stella McCallion—marking the first time in one year that four NMI female players have been snatched up for athletics scholarships by collegiate teams.

Costales is heading to Whitworth University in Washington, while her fellow Marianas High School Dolphins alumni Lilian Podziewski and Stephanie Flores are going to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in New York and Illinois College in Chicago, respectively.

All three schools compete in the National Collegiate Athletic Association—the biggest intercollegiate sports organization in the U.S. and a breeding ground for future Olympians and professional players.

McCallion, for her part, has committed to Cabrini University in an athletics scholarships. The school is a private Roman Catholic university in Radnor Township, Pennsylvania and plays under the NCAA Division III athletic program.



Grace Christian Academy 1 players and coach Cesar Libut celebrate an unprecedented fifth straight championship in the 2022 NMIVA-PSS Interscholastic Girls High School Volleyball League after defeating Marianas High School 1 in the title game at the MHS Gymnasium. MARK RABAGO

GCA wins 5th straight in volleyball

Competing during the COVID-19 pandemic is already hard enough, so completing a five-peat makes it doubly tougher.

But that's just what Grace Christian Academy 1 did after winning an unprecedented fifth straight championship in the 2022 NMIVA-PSS Interscholastic Girls High School Volleyball League last October.

The Lady Eagles 1 of coach Cesar Libut beat Marianas High School 1 in the title game, 24-22, 21-10, last Oct. 15 at the MHS Gymnasium.

The five-time championship team was made up of Katriel Suares, Hye Jin Elliott, Clerrise Dacumos, Soleil Lamar, Vicky Wang, Mint Karsuaythong, Eunice Pagaduan, and Allyssa Omampo.

Libut later admitted that this year's championship is probably the best GCA 1 has ever won in his years coaching at the Navy Hill school.

"I think this is the best championship I've ever won. For one, MHS 1 is really good. There's competition [this year]. A lot of our past championships were one-sided. We didn't have this [kind of competition]. But against MHS 1 and in their house and all the cheering thing… it's amazing."

The GCA 1 coach said prior to the start of the season, he had some trepidations about leading the Lady Eagles 1 to the Promised Land again.

"Sometimes it's so tiring and the pressure of winning and winning. I asked Kat [Saures] if she's tired of trying to prove we're still No. 1. Kat said 'I'm not tired of winning Mr. C.'"

Good thing Libut this time followed his ward's words.

2021 IN REVIEW



MARK RABAGO

Retired KSPN sportscaster Bob Coldeen lounges on a monoblock chair at his lovely Navy Hill home.

Bob Coldeen retires

"It was time" and with those three words long-time KSPN sportscaster Bob Coldeen laid down his camcorder and called it a career last October.

"You do a thing 28 years in a row, you know, it was just time," the 70-year-old former Peace Corp volunteer, Rota High School teacher, and Public School System federal programs coordinator said.

Coldeen became a household name in the CNMI with his own catch phrase "Did you get that, Bob?" in over three decades as the sportscaster of the local news broadcast.

Coldeen began his sportscasting career in 1993 after he joined Marianas Cable Vision, but unbeknownst to many he was recruited a full year before that.

The University of Florida alumnus said being a sportscaster in the early 1990s in the CNMI was like a dream come true for him.

"Those were really exciting days for sports because there was a lot of money coming in. There was a lot of excitement. Japanese professional baseball teams were coming in. Larry Hillblom invested $1 million into MCV. Those were heady days and everybody was like 'oh, the future is going to be great,'" he said.

Coldeen said now that he's called it a career he'll have more Saipan sunsets to enjoy with his lovely wife, Martha, at the terrace of their lovely Navy Hill home.



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Ja Morant scores 41 points, Grizzlies beat slumping Lakers PAGE 20



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

The Oleai Sports Complex will undergo a $21.2-millio facelift that will transform it into a modern state-of-the-art sports facility that will be the pride of the region.

2021 SPORTS STORY OF THE YEAR

$21.2M Oleai Sports Complex makeover

By MARK RABAGO
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A 2019 aerial shot of the Oleai Sports Complex.



A later aerial evening shot of the Oleai Sports Complex with some of the recent improvements.

"If you build it, they will come."

The Northern Marianas Sports Association is definitely banking on that after the U.S Economic Development Administration approved last June a $21.2-million grant to fund the transformation of the Oleai Sports Complex into a modern state-of-the-art sports facility.

The grant includes the renovation and rehabilitation of the existing Gilbert C. Ada Gymnasium. Aside from repairs and storm resiliency enhancements and building improvements, it will also include making the facility's roofing resistant to 190 miles per hour winds and a second-floor with an office space and conference rooms—so important in the CNMI following the onslaughts of super typhoons Soudelor in 2015 and Yutu in 2018.

A separate concrete storage facility (approximately 10 ft. x 20 ft.) will also be constructed to be associated with the gym and the Oleai track and field.

The grant would also cover the construction of an Olympic-size swimming pool with associated facilities such as a cantilevered roof, electronic timers, pumps, piping, water storage, spectator bleachers, locker rooms, and utility rooms.

Two International Tennis Federation-approved tennis courts with associated facilities such as warm-up walls, fencing, and bleachers will also be covered by the grant.

In addition, once the Oleai Sports Complex has been rebuilt it will allow the CNMI to invite international competition over and allow the CNMI to host events on a larger scale.

No less than Gov. Ralph DLG Torres said that the $21.2-million grant to make the Oleai Sports Complex the crown jewel of sports facilities in the region will definitely be a boon to local athletes.

"It's going to give our athletes a dream to pursue. It's also going to give us a better place to call home in terms of sports tourism, local sports, and it will also give our athletes the opportunity expand on their abilities," he said.

NMSA president Jerry Tan said the EDA grant will encourage federations to continue to level-up in terms of sports administration.

"NMSA encourages its member-federations to level up in terms of sports administration and national athletes and coaches development, grassroots, and inter-scholastic programs and having the Oleai Sports Complex undergo a major transformation through the EDA grant will help them achieve these goals and more," Tan said.

With world-class facilities, he said athletes and coaches will also be better prepared for competitions.

"We can bring in more students and young athletes to various sports programs, widening the pool of talents we can develop for the national team and prepare for athletics scholarship opportunities. The transformation will also provide our community a safer and suitable venue to conduct activities that promote a healthy and active lifestyle," he said.

The $21.2-million grant to give the Oleai Sports Complex a makeover later received some criticism from the Northern Mariana Islands Tennis Association. This, after NMITA president and CNMI Sports Hall of Famer Jeff Race said he can't use the facility as a national tennis center with only the allotted two tennis courts.